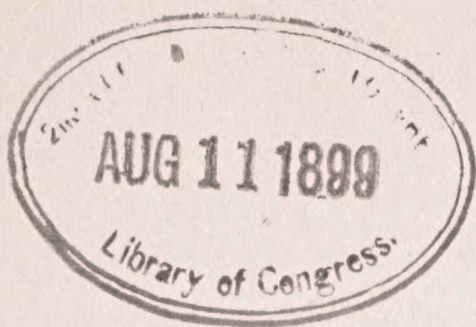




THE STRANGE
STORY OF
HESTER WYNNE

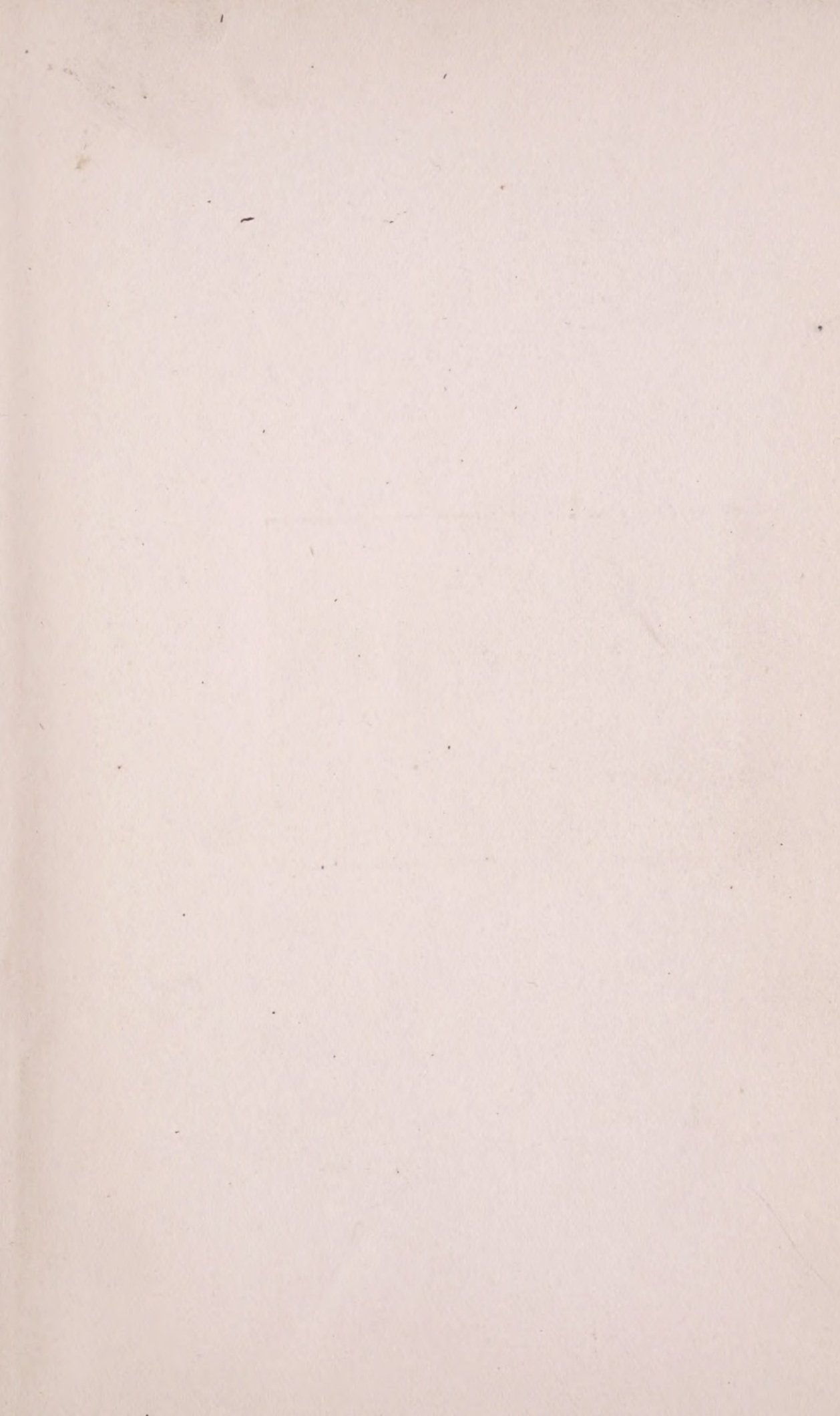


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D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, NEW YORK.

THE STRANGE STORY OF HESTER WYNNE

TOLD BY HERSELF

WITH A PROLOGUE

BY

G. COLMORE

AUTHOR OF A DAUGHTER OF MUSIC, ETC.

Mrs. Gertrude (Ranton) Weaver.

"For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me,
and that which I was afraid of is come unto me"



NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

1899

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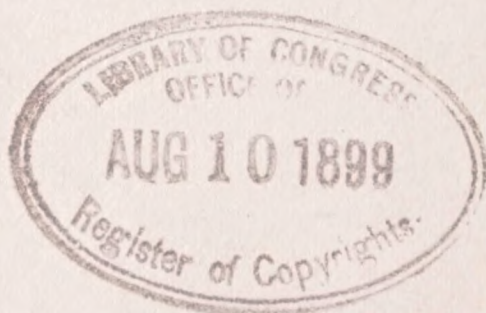
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TO
THE BOYS.

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THE STRANGE STORY OF HESTER WYNNE.

PROLOGUE.

AFTER a showery day the summer evening was both fair and still. Only a little languid breeze crept gently across the few bare fields and the moorland plain that lay around Granbigh Hold. Wide the plain was, but high, high up above the sea on the one hand, and the inland country on the other; ending abruptly, where it met the beat of the waves, in rocky, storm-beaten cliffs; shelving gradually towards the valley, where trees clustered about the homesteads and the heather gave way to corn. The sky was of the pale sweet blue that follows rain, and the clouds held the rare, rich colours that are the evening prophecy of rain to come: the sun came in a long slant right across the moor, holding in its warm embrace the budding heather, the cold gray walls that shut in Granbigh Hold, the green of the shorn grass fields; and fell upon the upper windows of the house, wide, small-paned and low, making them to gleam and glisten in their setting of hard stone. It was said the Hold had been a fort once, and the thick walls that hedged it in gave credit to the saying. Strong and high they rose, straight up out of the heather, broken only by a

postern gate of thick, long-seasoned wood; and the rare passers-by, seeing them from the distant road, said that the house must be a desolate place. But the desolation was all outside the walls, not within them. The gate opened on to a square of grass, green, smooth and trim, and all around it, hemmed in by a narrow flagged path, was a blaze of colour. Flowers grew in the wide border, with all the generous luxuriance that they give in payment for toil and care; the beauty of them, coming from the wildness without, made the straight-lined garden seem like a magic space stolen from Paradise; the fragrance of them filled the air. Close up to the gray walls they grew, finding no enemy, but a shelter, in the hard stone; and close under the windows of the house, making a gaiety that was silent indeed, but real and sweet.

This evening the silence was broken; not by any outside sound, for the garden was empty, and the dash of the waves against the rocks, that in stormy weather came with a boom right across the moor, was hushed to a murmur, powerless to travel so far; but by sounds that came from within the house, and out through an open window into the still beauty of the evening. The sounds, whether by contrast or essentially, had something of horror in them: human they were, yet with the animal note which breaks through human utterance when the thing uttered is the spontaneous, uncontrolled expression of intense emotion or acute physical pain.

Inside, in the room whence they came, the dusk was gathering, though a shaft of light, entering through the window, fell slantwise across the floor. There were five people in the room; a woman, three men, and, in the far corner where the sunlight

reached, a little child. One of the men was lying on a narrow wooden bed that faced the window, and it was from him the sounds came; moans of fear and suffering, cries that were half articulate, words blasphemous and obscene, unimaginable, unutterable, save through the medium of a diseased brain. James Brabrook was dying of drink, and the drink madness was upon him, making the bed on which he lay, the room which prisoned him, the whole world, into a horror of crawling, loathsome life. The two men who tended him, his coachman and his gardener, stood, one on either side of the bed, watchful and ready, waiting for the paroxysms which impelled him to escape, somehow, anyhow, from the terror that pursued him. And all the time his wife stood by his pillow and ministered to him as best she might, and witnessed his degradation, and listened to the words he said; and all the time, his little son stood silent and shrinking in the sunlit corner, afraid of that struggling figure on the bed, afraid of the strange, unusual atmosphere about him, afraid to move from the spot where his mother had placed him half-an-hour ago. After a while she turned and looked at him, and as his eyes met hers, the whip dropped from the little sun-browned hand that clasped it, and the child made a step forward.

"I'm frightened," he said.

The woman gave him a strange look, half compassionate, half stern.

"I meant you to be frightened," she answered.

She turned to the bed again, but presently she looked round once more and held out her hand.

"Come here!" she commanded.

The child hesitated: fear and protection lay in the same direction, and the sense of one was as strong

as the desire after the other: but the habit of obedience was stronger than either, and he advanced slowly. His mother drew him close up to the bedside.

“Look!” she said.

The child tried to shrink away, but her hand was firm upon his shoulder.

“Do you remember,” she went on, “how your father played with you on your birthday? how gentle and merry he was? how kind his face looked? That is the same face; that man lying there is the same father who carried you in his arms; but all changed”—her even voice took on an inflection of struggling, suppressed emotion—“all changed.” She turned her eyes from the bed to the boy’s face. “It’s drink does that,” she said slowly. “Remember always, it’s drink does that. Now go back into your corner.”

As the words left her lips, the man gave a violent leap that carried him half out of the bed, and his voice rang out in terror.

His struggles broke the bonds that held him down, and with a bound he was across the room and half out of the window, overlooking the cool green peace of the garden and the wild beauty of the moorland beyond. But the world as it was did not exist for James Brabrook; he was in a hell of his own making, and he struggled after an impossible salvation—escape from himself. His wife’s lips tightened, as, for a moment, it seemed as though his strength would outweigh the strength of his guardians: she showed no other sign of emotion. Her small, strong hands helped the men to drag him back to the bed and fasten him down to it; and she did not flinch from her post at his side when his impotent agony found vent in a torrent of impurities. Only her face

grew a shade paler as his voice rang out through the room; for, though she did not know the actual significance of the words he uttered, the intuitive recognition of evil which seems to be common to all mankind, creating an antagonism of pain in a pure nature, a sense of dim, attractive fellowship in a corrupt one, revealed to her their essential quality. And to Elizabeth Brabrook evil, in its grosser forms, was especially abhorrent; the sins of the flesh came not within the sphere of her sympathy; vice was to her a weakness as well as a degradation, and she despised it as much on the first account as on the second. Her face showed her to be a woman to whom virtue, in the commonly accepted sense of the term, was easy: not that it lacked beauty, for the face, with its straight, delicately cut features, was a beautiful face; but in that it denoted a nature, balanced, passionless, strong with the strength of innate purity; a purity, not that of gold which has passed through fire, but of a precious stone shining beyond the reach of flames. Temptation, that is to say, the combination of outward opportunity with inward desire, did not exist for her in its commoner forms, for the tendencies of her nature were all towards a rigid puritanism both of thought and conduct, and the subjection of will to sense roused in her only contempt. Yet towards her husband, outwardly at least, she had never failed. Her creed taught her that she was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, that a woman should stand by the man she married, that a wife should be in subjection to her husband; and through all the misery of her married life it had never occurred to her that she should leave him, should cease to bear with him, should relax her efforts to wean him from his evil ways. Now, as she

stood by his bedside, the love of the woman for the man she had married quite dead within her, the sense of the duty of a wife towards her husband* never faltered; and stronger than any feeling of duty, horror, disgust, was the desire to save a perishing soul.

The paroxysm of frenzy was over now, and the man lay quiet, breathing heavily. Elizabeth Brabrook went down on her knees by the bedside and prayed in a low steady voice. "O Lord," she prayed, "Who gavest the blood of Thy Son to cleanse the wickedness of men, pour that holy tide into the heart of the sinner—" She paused and turned her head towards the boy, who stood with frightened eyes and drooping mouth still in his corner.

"Come here!" she said, "come and pray with me for your father's soul." The child came, shrinking but obedient. "Say the words after me," she said, and began again the prayer she had paused in.

"—blood of Thy Son," the child faltered after her, "holy tide into the heart of the sinner whom destruction awaiteth if Thy grace——"

The two men in attendance had drawn back from the bed, and when the prayer began a second time they too knelt down. The sunshine had died out of the room now, and the stillness of the twilight had come: there was no sound save the low even voice and the heavy laboured breathing. Then the breathing stopped. Elizabeth Brabrook finished her prayer and rose to her feet. She looked at her husband's face and turned to the man nearest to her.

"He's quite quiet now," she said, with a little catch in her breath.

The man returned her gaze in silence, and in a sheepish way raised his hand to his forelock; but his eyes answered her.

“No, no,” she said quickly, “he isn’t dead.” Then her lips, that had trembled, grew firm and straight again. “Leave me,” she said, “and take the child.”

When she was left alone she stood quite still. The time for prayer had gone by; “as the tree falls, so shall it lie,” was her belief; and no question of the justice of God stirred in her any thought or sense of rebellion. She stood by the bed and wondered how it was that, when the man’s soul had gone to hell, his dead face should look so calm.

CHAPTER I.

THE BEGINNING OF THE DREAD.

I REMEMBER so well the evening it all began, all the strange happenings which shadowed the earlier part of my life and made the days sometimes terrible, often unreal, almost always difficult and strange. We were driving home from paying a distant call, Mrs. Sullivan and I. It was late as regarded the length of the day, for the twilight was nearly gone, and the chief light came from the moon; but the evening was young by the clock, since the hour was not yet seven, and one felt, somehow, though the road was lonely and we met few passengers on our way, that the world of men was still astir. The sea was still, and the great hills rose about the bay, calm and majestic as though they had a right to aspire to the sky; and one felt, though of course one could not see, the vast stretches of moorland bog lying beyond them; and the pathetic solitude of Ireland's waste spaces crept forth from the Connemara wilds and held the highway with its silence. For it was in Ireland that I was driving that night; in Ireland, the fairyland of my girlhood's days, my world's Eden, of which this country lying about Sunset Bay seemed to me the very garden. Desolate I have many a time heard it called; but I loved the loneliness of it, which to me was never

lonely ; I loved the blending colours on the bogland, I loved the peaty smell of the air, I loved the wild, rough winds that came straight from the Atlantic waves ; and I loved the kind and merry hearts that made it home to me.

It was not really my home ; my real—no, real is not the right word ; ostensible is the fitting term to use—my ostensible home was with Mrs. Pimpernel in London. But Mrs. Sullivan had been a friend of my father's, and all through my childhood's and girlhood's days she had opened to me the circle of her happiness whenever Mrs. Pimpernel would let me come and enter it. It was not very often ; my periods of freedom were as rare as they were happy ; for Mrs. Pimpernel did not approve of my Irish visits, and it took all Mrs. Sullivan's powers of persuasion to open my London cage. Mrs. Pimpernel was my guardian, the friend of my mother's youth, and left by her with absolute control—as I thought then—over my fate. I often used to wonder when I looked at my mother's picture what the bond between them had been ; for my mother's face, judging from the portrait of it—I have no recollection of the reality—must have been infinitely sweet. Plaintive somewhat, it looked, and with such gentle eyes, and hair that was very fair and soft ; while Mrs. Pimpernel was sallow and stern and stout, a type of woman intensely antipathetic to me ; though whether my antipathy to the type was born of my dislike of Mrs. Pimpernel, or my dislike of Mrs. Pimpernel sprang from innate intuitive antipathy, I cannot honestly say. Anyhow I liked her no more than she liked me. And she never liked me ; I knew it and felt it with a child's sure instinct the day I went into her house ; and though with her religion and her self-suppres-

sion and her strong will she forced herself to do what she felt to be her duty by me, the dislike was always there, and the day was to come when it would blaze out into hatred.

But this is not the place in which to speak of Mrs. Pimpernel, and indeed I was not thinking of her at all as we drove through the chill mistiness of the October evening. The moon was up, as I have said, a little blurred by the thickening atmosphere, but the moon was the only light; thin clouds lay over the heavens, and the stars were not strong enough to pierce their folds. As we drove, the silence and the gathering mist, which had held at first nothing but pleasant mystery, began to seem to me a little weird. Mrs. Sullivan was on the other side of the car, and I broke the stillness by a remark to the coachman, seated between us on the well.

"A fine night, Pat," I said; "but there are no stars."

"No, miss," he answered me. "Shure the curtains are drawn over the windows of heaven to-night."

The remark, characteristic of the Irish fancy which gives colour to the speech of her peasants, pleased me, for I was full of fancies myself in those days, and I sat silent again, musing upon it as we drove along. We sped down what I used to call the first hill, and then down the second, and now we touched the bay again, driving, for a quarter of a mile or so, close beside it. A low wall held the sea from the road; the tide was in, and I could hear the gentle lapping of it through the rumble of the wheels and the clop of the horse's hoofs. Suddenly the calm of the scene and the hush of the atmosphere became tense; some strange thrill passed either through me

or my surroundings, or perhaps through both; and all at once I was excited instead of dreamy, and my musing passed into watchfulness. For what? I could not in the very least tell, but all my life I have been subject to presentiments, and in that moment a wave of apprehension washed over me, and dying down again, yet left upon me a faint spray of fear. I remember noticing just then, with the sort of double consciousness which gives one at the same time cognisance of the outer and inner worlds, how the moonlight caught the water, making a path of troubled light, and noticing too that between me and the path, for one moment, a barrier arose, hiding the brightness. A man it was, walking in the same direction as that in which we were moving. I don't know how, but somehow, without looking at him, without consciously observing or considering him, I seemed in some strange way to know he was not a native of the place. Soon after, the road wound to the left, away from the water, and turning for a last look of the sea, I caught again, plodding steadily on, a dark blot in the gray, the figure of the wayfarer.

We were alongside the walls of the Sullivan land now, and soon came the sharp swing round the corner where, as a child, when I first learned to sit on an outside car, I had to cling to the seat to prevent myself being jerked off; and then we were through the gates and up the climbing drive, and the lights of Shividallagh were twinkling us a welcome.

Inside the hall all was brightness, and the boys (there were three of them at home, the fourth—or the first, rather, for he was the eldest—being far away in America at the time of which I write) came trooping out of the billiard-room to give us a wel-

come. They had been out spearing eels, and were lounging now, as their habit was, examining guns and fingering revolvers, till the moment when it was no longer possible to put off dressing for dinner. From seventeen to twenty their ages ran, and I, who was twenty-two at that time, and had known them for ten years back, had a sense of comradeship with them which made not a small part of the delights of Shívdallagh. Shívdallagh—or Shibthallagh, as the people about the place called it—is the Irish for beetle, and the house took its name from an island near at hand in the bay, which was supposed to be like a beetle in form.

“Are ye tired, ma’am?” asked Horace, taking my cloak. They often called me ma’am, the boys; why I don’t know. It was one of their forms of speech, which were various, and peculiar to themselves, and were given forth with the strongest Irish accent, though they could speak—and did, when on their good behaviour—as pure English as the veriest Sassenach.

“I am not,” I answered, with the Irish avoidance of the direct no and yes which always became natural to me after I had been two days in Ireland. “Did you have good spearing?”

“Ay, we did, we slew them—the robbers!”

“It was grand!” said Dick, the youngest. “Only my shins are in splinters with the rocks.”

“And it’s myself that’s in the same state, be-gorra,” said Ned, the sailor, home from his ship, and still girt about with the glamour of recent absence.

“All for the good of health,” said Horace. It was one of his favourite phrases, and was used frequently and indiscriminately in the course of his conversation.

"You'll go up in good time to get ready for dinner, won't you, boys?" said Mrs. Sullivan, beginning to mount the stairs.

"We will, Old One, we will," came the answer in a chorus. Old One was their name for their mother, chosen, I suppose, because she was not old at all, nor in any sense; and then they strolled back to the billiard-room, Horace's turned up trousers showing spaces of bare legs above his socks. I went up to my room, and by-and-by, within a quarter of an hour of dinner-time, I heard a rush upon the staircase, and a scuffling along passages, and fragments of conversation: "Let go now, I say!" "Bedad, but I'll——" "Would ye now?" and then I knew that it was all right and that the boys were dressing for dinner.

After dinner we all went into the billiard-room. Ned and the madman, as Horace was generally called, began a game of billiards, and the rest of us sat round the peat fire and talked or were silent as the mood took us; not that silence ever lasted for more than half a minute when the boys were all together, but, just because their voices were never still, there was no need to talk unless one felt inclined to. There was a fire in the evening nearly all the year round at Shiddallagh, and it was always of peat, and it always blazed with a brilliantly persistent glow which seemed to me then, and seems to me now as I look back to it across the years, more intense and more cheerful than any sent forth by coal. A peat fire is often sulky at the start; you need to understand it—as indeed you need to understand all things Irish, let alone the people, before you can begin to deal with them—but if you do, and if you will coax it a bit, I know no fuel that throws out to you, in such

ungrudging and generous wise, the very best, the very essence of itself. The pictures one sees in fires are clearer, I think, in fires of peat; perhaps the romance of the mighty forests of past days still quivers in its fibres and leaps forth again, as the fire touches it, to a momentary life. Anyhow those Irish fires were apt to set me dreaming, and I dreamed that evening, I know, while the voices of the boys and their merriment fell upon and filled my outer ears. "All the way, all the way," I heard the madman say coaxingly to a ball of slackening speed. "Ah, ye robber!" as the ball stopped. "Boys a boys, what a stroke that would have been!" "He's got the spikey hump," observed Ned, who, fresh from cruising, employed sometimes a more cosmopolitan slang than that which was peculiar to Shivdallagh. "Isn't that watty now?" Horace said presently, as the ball fell gently into the left-hand centre pocket. "Ye're a schamer" (schemer), observed Dick from his arm-chair. "It was the cannon ye were after." "Cannon be blowed!" rejoined Horace with a show of indignation, and then, having made a horrible grimace, he reverted to his ordinary happy-go-lucky tone. "All for the good of trade," he said. And even as I listened and laughed, still I dreamed, my fancy growing vivid in the fire. I dreamed of course of what my life was to bring to me, for the woman's curiosity as to the future was strong in me, and I longed for the pages of my destiny to unfold. Lovers of course were in my dreams, and scenes of heroism and endurance; and there was to be one lover before and beyond the rest, and for him I was to do great deeds, to save him—I did not know from what. Somehow I could think of nothing more reckless or heroic just then than the defying of Mrs. Pimpernel, and

that hardly seemed grand enough, though to be sure——

“Well, his legs are thick enough,” Dick’s voice broke in upon my musing.

“Sure he’s taken out his brains and strapped them on to his calves,” said Ned.

“For the good of health,” put in Horace.

“Boys, boys, what rubbish you talk!” cried Mrs. Sullivan.

“And would ye have us wise before our time, Old One? Sure it’s good *sinse* to be foolish.”

“I’m going round to see the little mare,” Ned announced. “Will ye come, Madman?”

“I will.”

“I’ll stay with the Old One,” said Dick.

“May I come?” I asked.

“Good, my rattler. Come along!” was the form in which my request was granted.

“Put on a cloak, Hester,” Mrs. Sullivan called after me.

“I will,” I returned; and then presently we had crossed the large hall, and the small one leading to the side entry, and were out in the moonlight. The little mare was a young thing which Ned had bought at a ridiculously low price at a fair. He had a good eye for a horse, and she was well bred and gentle, and he had recently begun to break her in. We paid our visit to the stable, and saw that she was all right after the gallop he had given her; and then we strolled round to the west side of the house, the side which looked towards Croagh Patrick and the sea, and close to which was the fairy fort. The moonlight turned the mist to silver, and there was a strange still charm about the night that worked upon us all, I think, and made us linger ere we went indoors again.

"Let us go into the fort," I said, "and see if the fairies are about."

The fort, a raised mound, surrounded by a thick hedge and shaded by trees, was almost in shadow; only, through one of the openings cut here and there in the hedge, the moonlight found its way, making a path across the darkness. Somehow the lighted space brought back to me the moonlit pathway on the water I had seen on the drive home; and, curiously, with the recalling of that picture, came again the sense of apprehension which had arisen with the actual vision. Again came the feeling of alertness, of watchfulness, and again I asked myself, for what. There could hardly have been a more peaceful night, so still it was and soundless; soundless at least till——

"Boys," I said, breaking the charm which had held us in a rare silence, "why do the dogs bark?"

"For pure divilry," answered Horace.

"No," said Ned, "they're watty. There must be somebody about."

We waited, listening. There was no sound or movement in the autumn night; only—in me, at least—a growing sense of some unseen presence, and the persistent barking of the dogs. Then—was it just the crackling of a twig? and did the shadows move? or—I grasped Ned's hand with a quick catching of the breath, and pointed. Outside the fort a shadow fell upon the moonlight on the lawn, and it seemed to me that for a moment, in the mass of bushes bordering the grass, there was a movement.

"What is it?" Ned asked.

"There's somebody," I answered in a whisper, "there," and again I pointed.

"Bedad, if there is I'll have a crack at him," said

the madman, and in an instant he was knocking at the billiard-room windows, and in hardly more than a minute's space, as it seemed to me, he was back again, a revolver in his hand, while Dick followed close behind, carrying the carbine. Ned went forward to meet him, and I, standing for a moment alone, became conscious of a rustling and of a stealthy footfall which crunched the gravel near at hand.

"Boys, boys!" I cried; and "Boys, what is it?" called Mrs. Sullivan from the window.

The answer was a yell from three strong throats, as, breaking from the shadow of the shrubs, out into the misty moonlight, dodging in and out amongst the bushes, followed by the five bullets of Horace's revolver and the report of Dick's carbine, leaping, stooping, racing for dear life, sped the figure of a man.

CHAPTER II.

THINGS WHICH I DID NOT TELL.

Nothing more of moment happened on that evening. The wicket gate in the wall at the bottom of the garden was open, and beyond lay the fields drenched in dew and curtained by the mist. Hither and thither went the boys, the hunter's and the fighter's instincts in them aroused and keen; and close by the house I stood and watched and waited; trembling, excited, afraid, and yet with some strange feeling that was partly curiosity and partly defiance of my own fear, giving me a sort of courage. Mrs. Sullivan had gone indoors to comfort and soothe the child upstairs, the only daughter of the house, who had been waked by the noise of the shooting; and so I was alone. I had got my own little revolver from the gun cupboard and loaded the five barrels of it. I was used to shooting at a target with the boys, and I remember, as I stood there, wondering if I could hit the man should the chance come to me. *The* man I called him, for in my mind he had a distinct personality: he was the cause of the curious feeling which had come upon me during the drive that evening; he was one with the figure we had passed on the road; he was in some way concerned with my affairs; his purpose in coming to the west, in venturing to approach the house, had to do with me. That it was an evil purpose I never doubted;

intuition, which had already warned me, now told me certainly that danger headed my path; and as intuition had already in the course of my life told me many times the truth, I did not doubt her message. But what could the danger be? Ah, that I could not imagine. I had no wealth to incite to theft, no heritage to prompt murder. That Mrs. Pimpernel received half-yearly payments for my maintenance I knew, though whence they came I never could find out, as, on the one or two occasions on which I had ventured to ask for information, she had merely told me that the lawyers paid her the money, and had refused any further answer to my questions: but wherever it came from or in whatever sense it belonged to me, I was convinced that I could not be wealthy. And as for my personal possessions—well, I had my clothes, the bracelet Mrs. Sullivan had given me when I was one-and-twenty, and my mother's locket. Who could envy me? And who could desire to do me ill, apart from any gain resulting from the ill-doing? These thoughts, and others such as these, flitted in incoherent wonderings across my brain as I stood there waiting, my revolver ready for use, my finger on the trigger, my heart beating at twice its usual speed, and my senses of sight and hearing keenly on the alert. I felt as if it would be almost a relief if that stealthy enemy of mine (for stealthiness was the quality with which somehow I especially credited him) were to come upon me face to face, so great was the tension of watchfulness and dread; but, as I said before, nothing more of moment happened that evening, and when the boys came back, baffled in their search, I began to feel that my courage was a very slight thing, and that I would much rather sit down and cry than have the chance

of shooting anybody. The boys were surprised to find me waiting there.

"And is it yerself?" they asked.

"I had my revolver," I answered, in a voice sadly out of keeping with the use of firearms.

"And would ye have used it, ma'am?" said Dick.

"Sure she would," Horace answered for me; "she'd shoot for a bet."

We all went into the house. The fire was burning brightly, and I was glad of the warmth, for I had not known till then how chilled I was. The boys began at once to talk, and their talk of course was all of the evening's adventure, of the "robber" and the "schamer" and what they would have done if only the mist had cleared enough to let them have a crack at him. All sorts of conjectures as to who and what he was did they give forth, and many motives did they credit him with, from Fenianism to apple stealing; and all the time I sat drawn close up to the fire and said: "It was me, me, me he wanted to harm." But I said it only to myself, for it would seem ridiculous, I knew, to anybody else.

At last, somehow, Mrs. Sullivan got us off to bed. It was a somewhat difficult task, for excitement was strong in all of us, and the talk poured forth in a stream which it seemed almost impossible to arrest. It was managed, however, in the end, and we trooped upstairs in a body, and I remember feeling especially glad that night that it was the established custom of the boys and their mother to see me to my room.

"I wish," I said, feeling more than half ashamed of myself, "that one of you would look under the bed."

"Why wouldn't we?" they answered, and in a twinkling the three of them were on their hands and knees, peering behind the valances.

"There's neither man nor divil," Dick announced; while his mother said to me:

"Are you nervous, Hester? Do you mind being alone?"

"Oh no, not at all," I answered, afraid to own my fear.

"You know Ettie and I are not far away," Mrs. Sullivan said; and then came the good-nights; Ned's handshake, for Ned didn't like kissing, the madman's resounding smack, and Dick's more sober salute; and then they were all gone, the door was locked, and I was alone.

Reader, do you know what it is to be born with a coward's nerves, and to rebel with all your heart and soul against fear? If not, be thankful, even if you are all coward; for it must be better, I am sure, less agitating at any rate, to be cowardly all through, than to be perpetually combating one's cowardice. But I was made in halves throughout my nature, I think, and all my life I have suffered from the internal conflict of the two sides of me. That night, when I was left alone, the reaction which had begun to set in when the boys joined me after my period of watching, came rapidly to a climax, and I was assailed by a rush of nervous terror which threatened paralysis of my will and self-control. Yet there was some instinct in me which defied and scorned my fear, and some innate force which impelled me to fight it; and so, struggling with myself, the braver part achieved at last the victory; and when I had said my prayers and was ready to lie down in bed, I was tranquil enough to yield to extreme fatigue, and soon sleep came to shut me away from trouble.

I awoke into darkness, the black darkness of night when the moon has set and the dawn has not

yet begun. Usually, in those days, my habit was to sleep on till morning, ignoring the passage of the black hours, and on the rare occasions when it happened that my rest was broken, I was always uneasy when I awoke, for I hated the darkness. That night it was unusually dark, I thought, and I closed my eyes again at once, trying to woo sleep by an effort of the will. But sleep is a coquette, as all must know who have tried hard to win her, and flees from those who desire her most; and the more persistently I kept my eyelids closed, the more wakeful did I become. I thought how still it was compared with the nights in London, where complete silence is rare as jewels; and then, by-and-by, as I lay, I was aware that the stillness was not absolute; some slight sound destroyed its completeness. Very slight the sound was, and only, I think, in the very dead of night could it have been distinguished, so careful were the feet that made it. For it was footfalls that I heard, footfalls soft, careful, intermittent; there would be a pause of two minutes, sometimes, between one and the next. I don't know how long I lay there listening to them, nor quite when I became aware that a faint lightening of the gloom showed itself in the window spaces; but there was a moment in which it became clear to me that the dawn had broken, and with that moment came courage and the power to act. I slipped out of bed, stole across the floor to a window, and—very cautiously—drew the blind just an inch aside. A dim gray light was creeping over the earth, and from the deeper darkness of the room I could distinguish faintly the outlines of the trees upon the lawn. The silence was complete just now; the sounds had ceased; and then presently came again the stealthy footfall, and, barely discerni-

ble in the meagre light, I saw the dark figure of a man steal across the drive and pause upon the grass beyond. It stood there from three to five minutes, perhaps, without stirring; and I, motionless also, watched it. Then, quite slowly, it moved across the lawn and disappeared in the darkness. I sat down on a chair near the window and began to think, and the result of my thinking was a resolution. I would tell nobody what I had seen that night; I would not disturb the happy current of the life at Shiddallagh by the cross current of my individual fate. The adventure of the evening before would soon be forgotten, the intrusion would be put down to a desire for stolen fruit, and I was very soon going back to England, and would take my destiny with me. For, reader, I never doubted that it was with me and my destiny that the events of the last nine hours were concerned; the superstition, intuition, apprehensiveness—call it what you will—that was born in me, told me so persistently; and if you read to the end of my story you will see that, whatever it was, it was justified by the event. I kept my resolution, I did not mention what had happened to me at the dawn; and there was another circumstance which also I did not mention. It was this.

In the morning, as I was dressing, I saw opposite my windows some small object on the grass, showing white against the green, and when I was ready for breakfast I went outside the house and crossed the lawn to see what it was. It was a half-sheet of note-paper, and on it was a rough sort of sketch, half picture, half plan, of Shiddallagh, with a cross in one corner of it, the corner where was the room in which I slept.

CHAPTER III.

I MAKE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF JESSE PIMPERNEL.

THE only pleasant thing in coming back to London was seeing Beta again. Beta was Mrs. Pimpernel's younger child (she had only two), and was a couple of years older than I was. We had always been good friends; I admired her very much, because she was tall and had a fashionable air which I never could acquire; and she was good-natured and had a fund of spirits which all her mother's religiousness had been unable to repress. She was waiting for me on the first landing, attired in her dressing-gown, for it was very early in the morning, and I remember how glad I was of her welcome and of the joy she showed at seeing me again. Her brother had come back from America, where he had gone many years before, while I was in Ireland, and I had thought that she might not care for my companionship so much now that she had his.

"I suppose you're awfully pleased to have him back?" I said, when our first greetings were over.

Beta twisted up her face in a queer, funny way she had; then she stooped and whispered in my ear. "I'm not so sure that I like him very much," she said.

"Oh, Beta!" I exclaimed, a good deal shocked, for at that time I thought it almost immoral not to

like all relations, and I had always been very glad that there was no tie of blood between me and Mrs. Pimpernel. Beta and I had two little rooms side by side on the floor above her mother's bedroom; there was a door of communication between them, and very often we opened it and talked together while we were dressing.

Mrs. Pimpernel was sitting at the head of the table with a large Bible open before her when I went downstairs. I kissed her as usual, on the forehead, and she said she hoped I was well; and then I took my customary seat in the window beside Beta, and the servants marched in and prayers began. Morning after morning have I sat on that same chair and watched Mrs. Pimpernel's broad back as she read out in her somewhat guttural voice words so familiar to me that they had ceased to bear any meaning. There came a day when my ears were opened, and when the Biblical phrases became to me full of wisdom instead of being mere sequences of words which pleased—I do not know why—my musical sense; but the day was not yet, and prayers made simply an occasion for the study—unconscious though it was—of Mrs. Pimpernel's personality. At breakfast she inquired after Mrs. Sullivan's health, and asked if I had finished the work for the Missionary Sewing League which I had taken with me to Ireland. I had not; there was one flannel petticoat still untouched, and I was obliged to answer with a shamefaced negative. Somehow in Ireland it had not seemed to matter very much whether the heathen children had one petticoat more or less by October; but now, with Mrs. Pimpernel's eyes upon me, it appeared all-important, and I felt that I was a backslider of a low grade.

"It will soon be done," I said hurriedly.

"Is the band on?" asked my guardian.

Truth and cowardice fought within me. I was tempted to answer merely, no; but truth prevailed. "It isn't begun," I gulped out. "But," I added, crumbling my toast, "I shan't be long over it. I can work very quickly."

"Then all I can say," observed Mrs. Pimpernel, "is that if that is the case, you have hitherto hid your talent in a napkin."

After breakfast I betook myself, accompanied by the flannel petticoat, to the little room at the back of the house which was given over to the use of Beta and myself; the study, Mrs. Pimpernel called it, but we had named it the pigsty, so littered was it apt to become with tokens of our various employments. I began at once upon my task, with unwonted diligence, for I was not an enthusiastic worker; and presently, having got well into the herringboning, my fingers became capable of continuing their task independently of my mind, and my thoughts flew back to the friends I had left, to Mrs. Sullivan and the boys, and then to that strange night of adventure, which began to seem to me less alarming and important in character now that I was back in the sober prosaic atmosphere of South Kensington. "Imagination, a great deal of it," I thought; "and as for presentiments—well, I'm always fancying something. All rubbish!" I repeated more than once, and even during the repetition a reminiscent sense of the strange apprehension which had proclaimed itself that night in Ireland stole over me again.

"I'm a perfect fool!" I exclaimed; and indeed my nerves seemed curiously out of order, for the

turning of the door-handle at that moment made me jump.

"Have I startled you?" asked a man's voice.

"Oh no!" I answered, in the foolish way in which one denies the obvious, "not at all."

"Have you forgotten me, little Hester?"

I did not like him calling me little Hester—it savoured of impertinence, I thought; what business was it of his whether I was tall or short? But I answered without showing any annoyance:

"You're Mr. Jesse, I suppose." *I* would not be too familiar, at any rate.

"I am Jesse," he replied. "Have you forgotten me?"

I remembered the boy Jesse, as I had seen him years ago, but the man Jesse I should not have known.

"You have altered since I saw you," I said. "I should not have recognised you if I had met you in the street."

"Nor I you. And yet I don't know. You have still the eyes."

I suppose I looked at him inquiringly, for he went on after a moment's pause: "You have rather odd eyes, you know."

"No, I don't know," I rejoined somewhat tartly. *Odd* was an adjective I did not care about, and again I thought him impertinent.

He perceived my annoyance evidently, for he smiled, and, "It's a compliment, I assure you," he said.

"I'm not fond of compliments," I replied, with what I thought a good deal of dignity.

"I beg your pardon," he said humbly, and I began to think I liked him better. "But it's true all

the same," he remarked presently, "that I have always remembered your eyes. They're seeing eyes, you know."

"I have never imagined myself to be blind," I returned, with what I intended for sarcasm.

O reader, I was very young in those days, and the bloom of illusion still lay on the fruit of life; and sometimes when I look back I think—but never mind, that's neither here nor there; but it was pleasant to think oneself a discerning person.

"How sharp your tongue is!" said Jesse, and that rather pleased me. "I didn't mean seeing in the ordinary way," he went on.

"Indeed?" I queried, as he paused.

"No, they're the sort of eyes that might—— Do you ever have presentiments?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh yes!" I exclaimed; and then, without knowing why, I checked myself. "I have had," I said carelessly, "but I don't believe in that sort of thing."

"I should have thought you did."

"Oh no; it's rubbish."

"I dare say. Do you like being in Ireland?"

"Oh, I do! I always have a lovely time. The boys—but of course you don't know the boys."

"No. What are they like?"

"Like? Oh, I couldn't tell you. They're so funny, and so kind, and they can shoot and fish and row and spear and ride and—oh, everything."

"They must be wonderfully clever."

I looked up. Did I detect a note of irony in the speaker's voice? His face was quite grave, at any rate.

"I don't know about clever," I said; "I never thought about it. But they're—oh, I don't know;

I could never describe it to you; they're just the boys."

"It's a pretty place, isn't it?"

"Oh, I should think so, indeed!" And then, started on such a congenial topic, I launched forth into an account of Shividallagh and the life we lived there; and I fancy Jesse Pimpernel knew a good deal about the place and the people by the time I had done.

That afternoon there was the Dorcas meeting at Lady Blunderwell's, and though I was beginning to feel tired by that time, after my night's journey, of course I had to go.

"Hester looks sleepy," said Beta at luncheon, tentatively, with the benevolent intention of suggesting to her mother that I might be excused from that day's attendance.

"She must go to bed early," replied Mrs. Pimpernel.

"You should take a nap this afternoon," said Jesse to me across the table.

"Hester goes to the Dorcas this afternoon," Mrs. Pimpernel announced with decision, and nothing more was said on the subject.

"It's the flannel petticoat," I remarked to Beta, as we went upstairs to get ready.

"I suppose so," she agreed. "And the coffee's always so beastly at Lady Blunderwell's," she added irrelevantly.

Beta was very fond of coffee in the afternoon, and there was generally coffee as well as tea at the Dorcas meetings, which made the one oasis, she used to say, in a wilderness of under garments; but at Lady Blunderwell's it was weak, and she never could manage more than one cup. I worked very hard that

afternoon, simply because I was afraid I should go to sleep if I didn't. The atmosphere was stuffy, and the conversation of a kind which bored me—scandal tempered with religion—and I was greatly relieved when the arrival of the tea and coffee afforded an opportunity for moving about and shaking myself into wakefulness. After tea Mr. Bakenham arrived, and gave an address on missionary work in South Africa, and after the address came a prayer, which brought the meeting to a conclusion.

A curious thing happened on the way home. We passed a crowd congregated round a boy and a policeman. The boy had stolen a loaf, somebody said. I was sorry for him, though afraid to express my pity, knowing from experience that it would probably be construed into sympathy with sin; but I ventured to remark that he had most likely been very hungry. I expected a rebuke, and my guardian's reply astonished me. "The Lord knows we are all tempted," she said. It was so unlike Mrs. Pimpernel.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DOOR THAT MOVED.

AFTER dinner that evening, Jesse came and sat down beside me and began to talk. He had assumed a half confidential manner, which I found both flattering and vexatious. Why should he be confidential, I asked myself with some impatience, when our acquaintance was of the newest and slightest, for the little I had seen of him in my childish days, when he had been eighteen and I eight, I counted as nothing at all; and yet I felt the compliment in his attitude.

"What a curious chain you wear!" he said by-and-by.

"Yes; it was my mother's," I answered.

"And mysterious," he went on. "One doesn't see the fastening."

I coloured, for the chain was rather a sore subject with me. "There isn't any fastening," I said.

"No fastening? Then how—— But perhaps my questions are impertinent."

I felt that they were, a little, but I answered with affected indifference. "Oh, no!" I said, "but I should have thought you would have known about it. My mother had it fastened round my neck before she died, and my old nurse impressed upon me as a child that it was her wish it should never come off. So I suppose," I ended up, with an attempt at a

laugh, "that I shall wear it and the locket, as long as I live."

I was, truth to say, rather ashamed of my mother's eccentric legacy, and the boys' constant chaff on the subject had not tended to lessen my feeling in regard to it. "She knew you'd pawn it, ma'am," they used to say, "if she didn't make it secure," and, "Would ye go halves in the profits, if I was to file the links of it?" Horace would ask. In the daytime it lay concealed under my dress, but in the evening, when my neck was bare, I could not hide it. The locket was made somewhat in the form of a padlock, the idea of which was carried out by a small aperture, which might have passed for a key-hole, on the back of it; but I had never been able to examine it minutely, on account of the shortness of the chain, which made investigation possible only by means of a mirror. I had grown so used to wearing it, that days and sometimes weeks passed without my thinking of it at all; but when my attention was called to it I was conscious always of a feeling of vexation and something like shame, of the presence of which I was, in its turn, ashamed. Yet nothing would have induced me to sever the chain; it had become to me a sort of charm, and I had a fancy that to part with it would bring me ill-luck; a fancy which I had dwelt upon till it had grown into a superstition.

"It's a charm, perhaps," said Jesse, and his expression of my own idea led me to disclaim it altogether.

"I told you this morning," I said pettishly, "that I don't believe in rubbish of that kind."

"She gave you your eyes too, I suppose?" Jesse went on without heeding me.

"You're quite wrong," I returned; "I get my eyes from my father."

At this point Mrs. Pimpernel interposed, and said that after my journey of the night before I had better be going up to bed. I was, in truth, very tired, and I went upstairs with the intention of getting into bed as quickly as possible. But there is a stage of fatigue when one shrinks from the labour of undressing and the many little observances of the nightly toilet, and the result of my longing to be in bed was that I dawdled frightfully over the process of getting there. I had come upstairs an hour sooner than usual, and I was still sitting, half undressed, before the toilet table, when I heard the well-known creak upon the stair which told me somebody was coming.

"Dear me! and I meant to be in bed ever so long before Beta arrived," I inwardly exclaimed, and began to brush out my hair with a sudden access of energy.

"She thinks I'm sound asleep already, I suppose," I thought, as the door into the next room remained closed. "Just as well, for if we began to talk now, we should sit up half the night."

Beta was unusually quiet; she did not shut her door with the usual bang, nor did I hear her strutting about her room as her manner was. I was quiet too, for hair-brushing is not a noisy process, and, except for the little electric crackling evoked by the contact of the brush with my hair, I made absolutely no sound. I got to the plaiting stage, and was beginning to think that rest was near at last, when an odd thing happened. The dressing-table stood in the window, and the door into Beta's room exactly faced it in the opposite wall, so that as I sat I could see the door reflected in the mirror. There was no sound

of the turning of a handle, but, quite gently, slowly and noiselessly, the door opened. I could see it as I sat, and I watched it, quite motionless, hardly breathing even, with a sort of fascination. It moved, inch by inch, so slowly, that I wondered at first if my eyes deceived me, though beneath the questioning surface of my mind I knew that they did not. Who or what was there? Oh, anything would be better than the pause, the waiting, the unseen presence of that evil thing that moved the door and watched me. No, hardly that; that was not possible—my mind worked with an odd clearness all the time behind the spell that held me—for the angle of the door would not permit the intruder to see me as I sat; it would need to be opened wider before the eyes could meet mine in the glass; the bed alone was visible through the narrow space between the doorpost and the door. I sat and listened and waited, and then, still very slowly, and softly, the opening diminished again; once more the door was shut. For a moment I wondered if I had been under a delusion, and the next moment I called myself a fool, and said that of course Beta had come up, and fearing to disturb me, had looked in with unaccustomed caution to see if I were awake. But if so—the thought followed rapidly—she must have seen that I was not yet in bed, must have seen the light.

Suddenly I seized the candlestick and rushed into the other room.

“Beta!” I said, and then louder: “Beta, Beta, where are you? You must be there.” But the room was empty.

CHAPTER V.

THE PROPERTIES OF MY EYES AND OTHER SENSES.

FROM that night onward, the night of the opening door, it seemed to me that I was dogged by some unseen presence. Sometimes I thought it might be a supernatural agency—for I had a strong tendency towards what is termed superstition—which haunted me; and sometimes a fellow creature, made of flesh and blood like myself. I was not always conscious of it, and indeed often days, and sometimes a week or even a fortnight would pass without any sign of its presence, and during those intervals I would tell myself that I was fanciful, unhealthily nervous, and absurd; but always when I had reasoned myself into composure, something would occur to upset me again, and to bring back the atmosphere of unreality and danger which was straining my nerves and strength. I never can quite describe the sensations of that time; looking back, it seems to me that they must have been compounded of intuitive apprehension and ordinary reasonable fear; I say reasonable, because of the actual positive grounds I had for alarm. I spoke of what I suffered to nobody but Beta, and even to her not very often—only when things happened; when I was merely apprehensive, when I merely *felt* evil about me, I kept my terrors to myself. Jesse was very tiresome, I thought, in those days.

“And the seeing eyes,” he would often ask me, “have they seen anything lately?”

Did he divine, I wondered, that I was often afraid, that I fancied—for to fancy he would assuredly have put down my experiences—that I had cause for alarm? I could not tell; but sometimes, when something had happened to upset me, he would harp on the subject of my second sight, till I wondered whether my face or my demeanour showed the disturbed condition of my nerves.

I remember one morning, in particular, when his persistency roused me into a display of temper. I had not slept well the night before, and indeed my nights were often restless now; and I had seen for myself that my cheeks were pale, and that there were heavy marks beneath my eyes. Mrs. Pimpernel had remarked in the interval between prayers and breakfast that I was looking sallow, and advised me to take a liver pill. I knew I was not bilious, and had no intention of following her prescription; but I knew also that I was not well, and I was overcome by an intense longing to get away from the gloomy London house, away from the nervous fears which beset me, away out into the open country, to rest and happiness and safety. I was at work upon a chemise for South Africa—the flannel petticoat had been finished long ago, and handed over to the stewardship of Mr. Bakenham—when Jesse came lounging into the pigsty. He was very apt to find his way in there when I was working; sometimes I was, in a manner, glad of his company, sometimes it jarred upon me. This morning I did not at all want him, and I gave him no look or word of welcome. He sat down at a little distance; I did not speak, nor did he, but I felt that he was watching me,

and I was intensely conscious of my battered appearance.

"Little Hester is gloomy," he said at last.

I strongly objected to his calling me little Hester; I thought the terms of our acquaintance were not sufficiently intimate to warrant it; but I determined not to state my objection for fear of furnishing him with an additional means of vexing me when he was in a teasing mood.

"Do you think so?" was all I answered.

"I am sure of it."

"There is an obvious method of avoiding my gloom," I said.

Jesse laughed in what I called his fat way; I can find no other word to describe it.

"What a spitfire it is!" he said.

I made no answer, and presently he spoke again in quite a different tone. "Hester," he said gravely, "there's something the matter with you. What is it?"

"You're quite wrong," I replied; "there's nothing more the matter with me than there is with you."

"I don't know that you've chosen a very good example," he returned. "But that's neither here nor there. There is something the matter with you; I'm sure of it. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"If you're so sure about it, you ought to know," I said. "You know so much more about it, apparently, than I do."

"Ah, you won't trust me," he said softly. Then, after a short pause, "I do know, all the same though," he went on. "It's those eyes of yours."

"I am not aware of anything being wrong with my eyes," I said, with a poor show of not understanding his meaning.

"You know very well what I allude to," he rejoined. "It's those inner eyes, behind the outer ones. You've been seeing things, Hester, that have disturbed you."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Very well, since you say so. I'll agree to anything if it gives you any satisfaction."

"And hearing. Come now, confess! What did you hear last night?"

Reader, indeed I had heard footsteps, footsteps that paused outside my door; and I had heard the door-handle gently turned. I had started up in bed then, and called: "Who's there?" and then all had been quiet again, and after a time I had heard the footsteps retreating softly down the stairs. For the last few weeks I had taken to locking myself in at night, but a day or two before something had gone wrong with the lock, and I had been unable since then to turn the key. I had asked Mrs. Pimpernel if I might have the lock mended, but she had replied that locking one's door at night was an absurd fad, and that it was very much better for me to be unable to indulge in such a practice. So I was helpless, I felt, and my nights had been more broken in consequence. But how did Jesse know of my real or fancied experience? Anyhow I would not let him see that his shot had gone home.

"I heard most of the hours strike," I answered, as coolly as I could.

"By Jove! you're a well plucked one!" he ejaculated.

I looked up in surprise.

"You're an awful coward, you know," he went on, "and yet you won't own your fears."

"This is quite ridiculous," I burst out, "and

what your object can be in coming here and talking such nonsense to me, I can't imagine."

He looked startled for a moment at my vehemence, and then he answered very gently. "I want to help you," he said, "and you won't let me."

I gave him no answer, and presently he went on speaking. "I know your nerves are all out of order; I can see how you start and change colour at any sudden sound; and I know—I am sure—that you have been fancying all sorts of things lately, that you hear and see things of a supernatural kind. I can always tell by your face when you have been troubled in that way."

"You must observe very closely," I remarked dryly.

"Because you are very dear to me," he answered.

His words, still more his manner, startled me; and when he rose from his chair and came towards me, my courage and my patience collapsed, and were replaced by a rush of temper.

"If I am dear to you," I exclaimed, starting up, "I wish to goodness you'd have the kindness and the decency to let me alone!" And before he could stop me I was out of the room, and rushing upstairs.

Beta was in her bedroom when I burst into it. "It's too bad of you," I said, "to go and repeat my confidences to Jesse. I'll never, never trust you again."

"What confidences?" asked poor Beta, turning towards me very wide-open eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes, you do!" I persisted. "You went and told him what I told you about last night, and you've often—you must have—you've often done it before."

"I've done nothing of the kind," retorted Beta indignantly, getting angry in her turn, "and if you're going to turn on me and accuse me of things I've never done, well, I don't want your confidences. So there!"

Then suddenly my heart melted. Beta was looking remarkably tall and fashionable in a new gray cloth gown, which, in spite of Mrs. Pimpernel's orders, had emerged from the dressmaker's hands, as indeed all Beta's garments did, redolent of style; but her round girlish face looked so perplexed and hurt, that I felt myself to be, in some odd way, an overbearing bully, who was attacking something weaker than itself.

"Oh, Beta, Beta," I said, "I didn't mean it; I know you wouldn't; but I'm so miserable, and I couldn't think how he knew."

"Knew what?" asked Beta.

"About last night, that I heard——"

"But does he?"

"Yes, and he said I might as well confess, and I wouldn't."

"I'm not sure he isn't right," Beta said calmly. "If you *do* hear and see these things——"

"If I *do*? Oh, Beta!"

"If you do, I'm not at all sure you oughtn't to say so. I'm sure you want a change, you know. And it might be the beginning of—of hallucinations, you know."

Her solemn face made me laugh, but, "No, I will not tell Jesse anything about it," I asserted vehemently.

"Well, just as you like," Beta agreed. "I shan't say anything. And as for Jesse knowing—it's just guessing, of course. Anybody could tell by the look

of you, you'd had a bad night, or a nightmare, or something."

"Do you think so?" I went to the looking-glass and inspected my face. The result was not satisfactory. "Oh, I wish I could get away!" I exclaimed.

"I wish you could," Beta agreed. She came over to me, and stooped down and kissed me. "Poor little thing!" she said, and I felt no longer like a bully, but like some helpless thing which needed protection; and, indeed, I think that a few stray tears fell down from those eyes which Jesse had made the subject of so much comment, on to Beta's new gray gown. But Beta didn't mind.

CHAPTER VI.

JESSE PROVES HIS FRIENDSHIP.

JESSE's manner at lunch was deprecating, and I felt that he wanted an opportunity for making up our quarrel—though the quarrelling, to be sure, was all on my side; but I would not give it to him. I stuck close to Beta as we left the dining-room, and all the afternoon I was out with Mrs. Pimpernel, or sitting with her in the drawing-room, still busy with the chemise. It was not till I went up to dress for dinner that Jesse was able to speak to me alone; then he waylaid me on the staircase, and stood a step above me with arms outstretched from wall to banisters, barring my passage.

"Hester," he said, "I'm so very sorry. I wanted so much to help you, and I only vexed you. Won't you forgive me?"

"Oh, of course," I answered, somewhat impatiently I fear, for I thought he was making a mountain out of a molehill. "There's no occasion to say anything more about it."

He did not move. "You're so hard," he said.

"I don't know what you mean by hard," I retorted. "I said I was willing to forgive you if you think you need forgiveness, and there the matter ends."

"You don't really though," he persisted.

"Don't really what?"

"Don't really forgive me. I believe you half hate me, Hester."

"I shall hate you altogether if you keep me standing here any longer," I said. "Why can't you be sensible, instead of harping on about a thing that's of no consequence?"

"It's of consequence to me," he answered.

"Well, I've told you it's all right. Please let me pass."

He paid no heed to my request. "Will you give me a proof that it's all right?"

"What proof?" I inquired warily.

"Ask me to do something for you, give me the privilege of being of some use."

"But I don't want anything. I wish to goodness you'd let me pass."

"You must want something. Come now, think, Hester!"

"Oh, well," I said in desperation, "ask your mother to let me go away for a change." And then, ducking down, I suddenly made a dart under his right arm, and was past him, flying up the stairs, before he realised that I had escaped.

That evening, after dinner, Jesse drew his chair up close to his mother's and talked with her for some time in a tone so low that Beta and I could not overhear anything that was said. I saw Mrs. Pimpernel shake her head once or twice, and it seemed to me that he was persuading her to something against her will; but it did not occur to me that I was the subject of the conversation till bedtime, when Jesse, detaining me a moment as the others passed out of the room, said, with an air of great satisfaction:

"It's all right, little Hester. You are to go away."

It was such good news, and so unexpected, that my heart warmed towards him in genuine gratitude. "Oh, did you really ask?" I exclaimed. "Oh, thank you, Jesse, good Jesse. Thank you again and again." Then, rather to my relief, for he had hold of my hand all this time, I heard Mrs. Pimpernel calling to me, and I broke away.

"I wish to speak to you, Hester," Mrs. Pimpernel said at the top of the stairs. "Come into my room, please."

I followed her with pulses quickened, partly by joyful expectation and partly by the apprehension which the prospect of an interview with Mrs. Pimpernel always excited. She sat down in her arm-chair by the fireplace, and I stood before her on the hearthrug.

"Jesse tells me that you have all sorts of fancies," she said.

I thought to myself that Jesse's way of helping and serving me showed a singular lack of tact and consideration, and I felt angry that he should have spoken of what I particularly wanted to hide.

"The fancies are more his than mine," I replied.

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Pimpernel.

"*He* says that I fancy things. *I* never said so."

"You as good as confessed to him that you heard, or imagined you heard, footsteps outside your door last night."

Now, as the reader knows, I had confessed nothing of the sort, and I said so, with more decision, I suppose, than was wise, for Mrs. Pimpernel drew her brows together in a way that I knew from long experience meant stormy weather.

"Then if you are quite well, if there is nothing in the world the matter with you, and your nerves

are all that they ought to be, why do you want to go away?" she asked sharply.

"I am not well," I answered. "I don't know what is the matter with me, but I am certainly not well; and I think that if I were in the country for a time, away from——" I stopped abruptly.

"Well? Away from what?" said Mrs. Pimpernel.

"Away from this dreary, haunted house," I had been about to say, but that would not do. "Away from London," I stammered, and I knew quite well that Mrs. Pimpernel was well aware that that was not what I had at first intended to say.

"Indeed!" She looked at me curiously. "But it is not so long since you came back." She was silent for perhaps half a minute, eyeing me all the while. "Yet you don't look well," she said at last, "you certainly don't look well; and I—I want to do my duty by you, to do what is best." Suddenly her voice changed from the somewhat dreamy tone it had taken on to one that was sharp and almost defiant. "I have always done that, haven't I, Hester?"

I was taken aback by her manner, and I answered, senselessly enough no doubt: "I suppose so."

"You suppose? Is that all you have to say after all the years that I—— Well, never mind. You had better get to bed; it's past your usual time, and you shall go away as soon as I can find a suitable attendant."

Mrs. Pimpernel rose from her chair and stood before me, looking at me with eyes which were full of scrutiny.

"You're not a bit like her," she said, "like your

mother; you're your father all over. Perhaps it's just as well, and yet—— Good-night," she ended abruptly, and turned away without offering me her forehead for the customary salute.

I was glad to be dismissed, and I hastened out of the room and up the stairs to Beta, full of my news.

"I'm going, Beta, I'm going," I said, throwing open the door which led from her room into mine.

"Going where?" inquired Beta, looking at me like a mildly astonished cow.

"Oh, I don't know, but away, away from this horrid house and the terrors of it. Oh, I'm so relieved, so glad!"

"It's very sudden," remarked Beta; then her eyes grew rounder. "Did you *ask* mother?" she said in an awe-struck tone.

"Oh, no! I should never have dared. It was Jesse."

"Jesse? Well, after all, Hester, he——"

"Yes, I know," I broke in, "and if only he hadn't said—— But I *am* grateful to him, really."

I went cheerfully to bed that night; the prospect of change, of relief from the fears which haunted me, filled me with new hope and courage; and I began to think that Jesse was right after all, that it was my nerves which were at fault, that the sights and sounds which had disturbed me were due to nothing more substantial than fancy. But I could not sleep, not for many hours at any rate, after I had lain down to rest, and all sorts of inquiries set afloat in my brain kept it excited and restless. How had Jesse, in reporting my experiences to his mother, managed to hit on the very thing which had actually happened? How had he known or guessed that I had heard, or imagined that I heard, footsteps outside my door on

the previous night? The problem made me vaguely uneasy. Had he the seeing eyes, with the possession of which he credited myself? Was he really able to read my thoughts and perceive my fears? I could not bear to think so, and I tried to turn my thoughts to pleasanter subjects, to my projected outing and the relief and happiness it would bring me. But here again disquieting reflections broke in. Mrs. Pimpernel had spoken of my going as soon as she could find a suitable attendant. Was I to go away alone with a maid, then? and a strange maid, moreover. The idea was distasteful to me; and yet, when I thought it over, I saw that it was almost the only feasible plan. In my longing to go away, I had not thought much of where I was to go to, and as I hardly ever paid visits, except to the Sullivans', I had no friends whom I could ask to take me in. To be sure, there was my old nurse, married to a farmer, who would have been only too glad to have me for a lodger; but I knew that Mrs. Pimpernel did not like her, and objected to any but the most distant intercourse between us; and therefore, though the thought of a farm and Jenny's kindly face filled me with longing, I put it on one side, knowing that my guardian would never entertain it. So I lay, thinking and tossing, till at last sleep came to me, and life and its problems faded from my ken as I passed into the land of dreams.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIGURE IN THE MOONLIGHT.

THE next day no further mention was made of my going away, but towards the end of the week Mrs. Pimpernel told me that the whole matter was arranged. She had heard of a farmhouse in Derbyshire where lodgings were to be had, and she had engaged a lady to be my companion and chaperon during the month I was to be away. A lady, a companion; that was much better than a maid anyhow, and since I could not have Beta with me—and both Beta and I knew that it was useless to suggest that she should go too—the arrangement seemed as good a one as I could expect. At any rate I was really going, and the prospect filled me with delight. I was a little what the Scotch call *fey*, I think, during the next few days, the days preceding my departure; freedom seemed so sweet a thing, and as freedom did I picture to myself my sojourn in Derbyshire; freedom from nervous fancies, from the stern discipline of Mrs. Pimpernel, from the society of Jesse, from the confined uncanny atmosphere of the house in South Kensington. And Derbyshire! It was a county I had never been in, but the very name brought visions of heather-covered hills, of free moorland, of remoteness from London sights and sounds, of rest and peace and pure health-giving air. I counted the

hours till my going, and it seemed to me that I had not known, till escape from my present surroundings became possible, how greatly I had longed for it. The last day had come; the morning was past, then the afternoon, then at last the evening; and now it was bedtime, and only the night remained, for I was to start soon after breakfast on the morrow. The night would soon pass; I had been sleeping better lately, and did not dread the hours of darkness as I had done a short while since. Besides, to-night I was unusually sleepy; I had a touch of cold, and Jesse had prescribed hot brandy and water. Mrs. Pimpernel did not usually approve of the taking of spirits, especially for young people; but on this occasion, as I had a journey before me, she counselled, or rather commanded, me to follow her son's advice; and as I was not used to alcohol in any form, I felt particularly drowsy.

"Oh, Beta, I wish you were coming too!" I said, standing in my dressing-gown by Beta's bedside.

"I wish I were," she answered, "except that——" She hesitated.

"Oh, Beta, is he back in London?" I asked.

"Yes, I saw him to-day when I was out driving with mother, and he *may* call any day, you see."

"Then of course, *of course* you couldn't go away. Oh, I do hope she'll like him—won't take a dislike to him at any rate."

"I'm afraid he's too nice for mother to approve of," said Beta ruefully. "You see, she likes such——"

"Such awful prigs," I put in. "And he isn't a prig at all, of course, and very handsome, I'm sure, from the photograph. What a good-looking couple you will make!"

"It may never be," said Beta, trying to be tragic, which was a thing she never could succeed in.

"Oh, yes it will," I said confidently. "You're made for happiness, Beta," and indeed she had always given me the impression that life would go easily with her.

I thought of her as I lay down in bed, and I wondered if there would be much difficulty in persuading Mrs. Pimpernel to accept as her son-in-law the smart young officer, who was so different in appearance from any of the men who visited at Regent's Gate, and whose acquaintance the mother and daughter had made at a friend's house in the summer. He was well off, that was one advantage, for with Mrs. Pimpernel, I guessed instinctively, wealth would tell in his favour. I was immensely interested in Beta's love affair, for I was romantic to my finger-tips, and Beta had acquired fresh importance in my eyes since I had heard the story of her courtship. There was no engagement, she said; "only an understanding, till we see how mother takes it"; but the term understanding conveyed to me a delicious sense of mystery, far more entrancing than the prosaic definiteness of a regular betrothal.

So I went to sleep in an atmosphere of vicarious love-making, my own troubles and dreads, my own pleasant anticipations, even, far from my thoughts. How long I slept I know not: I only know that I woke suddenly, with an impression of having been startled out of sleep, and with the sense of some unseen presence in the room. I lay quite still, for though the continued recurrence of uncanny sensations and experiences had not added to my courage, it had in a sort of way accustomed my nerves to the encounter of strange happenings, enabling me to

control, if not to master, my fears. So I did not move; I lay with half-closed eyes and waited. The minutes went on and on in complete and baffling silence; it was the quietest time of the night, and the muffled hush, which is the nearest approach to stillness that London ever knows, brooded over the city. Between the nearly-closed curtains a narrow shaft of moonlight found its way, making a dim silvery space amidst the darkness; but there was no sign of dawn, and I knew that the comfort of the daylight was as yet far away. By-and-by my pulses went less quickly, and the tension on my nerves was relaxed. Nothing happened; there was no sound or movement in the room; and I grew to think that fancy had again deceived me. As the thought strengthened to conviction, the startled sense of alarm with which I had awakened gradually subsided: I suppose, too, that the effect of the hot drink I had taken was still potent, and bit by bit drowsiness dulled my consciousness and held my eyelids closed. I dozed off in fact, was almost, if not quite asleep, when once more I was startled into wakefulness. I can feel the horror of that waking now—the faint rustling sound, the tentative touch, the breathing close to my face. Something—somebody stood by my bed, bent over me, touched me as I lay. I sprang up, I gave one cry of terror; then, with sudden desperate determination, I leapt from the bed and made for the door. I stood before it.

“Who are you?” I said; “you shall not go till you have told me.”

I remember that my voice was hoarse, and that it hardly rose above a whisper; but it reached, it must have reached, through all the room. There was no answer, but even as I spoke a figure glided across

the patch of moonlight and disappeared again in the darkness; I knew whither, by the sound of an opening door—the door into Beta's room. I stood without moving, dumb and helpless, till presently came the sound of bare quick-pattering feet, and Beta's voice spoke to me, startled and strained.

"Hester, did you call?" she said. "Did you come into my room? I thought I heard a cry, and then that you came——"

I had stolen back to bed with noiseless speed when first she began to speak. I was safe there now, and I broke in upon her questions.

"I had a dream," I said, "a sort of nightmare, and I dare say I called out. I'm all right now."

"No ghosts?" she inquired with an anxious intonation.

"No, I'm all right," I repeated, and then I heard her pattering back to bed.

I did not sleep again that night. I lay awake and pondered, and it seemed to me that the mystery about my life was deeper and stranger than ever. Why, I asked myself again and again, should that particular presence haunt my hours of sleep? For, reader, as the figure crossed the moonlight, it had for one moment been real to my eyes; and I thought I knew it.

CHAPTER VIII.

I GO TO DERBYSHIRE.

MRS. PIMPERNEL herself took me to St. Pancras, where my companion was to meet me. The first part of the drive took place in silence, but when we were about half-way down the Euston Road, Mrs. Pimpernel addressed me in a tone of some severity.

"I hope, Hester," she said, "that by the time you return to us you will have got rid of these nervous fancies."

"I hope so," I replied meekly; then the scene of the night rose up before me, and I repeated my words with desperate fervour: "Oh, I hope so!"

My guardian turned on me a momentary side glance.

"How did you sleep last night?" she asked.

I hesitated, in doubt how to answer, whether to be truthful or prudent.

"Pretty well," I faltered at last.

"That means, I suppose, that you had another experience?"

There was an ironical emphasis on the last word, and the irony nettled me.

"I had," I said boldly.

"May I ask," continued Mrs. Pimpernel, "what it was?"

"I was awakened," I said, "by someone standing by my bedside."

"Indeed! And then?"

I did not answer. Prudence—intuitive, not reasoned—asserted itself, and again I hesitated as to the nature of my reply.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Pimpernel.

"Nothing," I answered. "I jumped out of bed, but I found nothing."

"And saw nothing?"

"It was quite dark."

"Yes, of course."

With these words, my guardian, somewhat abruptly, closed the conversation, and nothing more was said till we reached the station.

As we alighted from the carriage, a woman's figure advanced towards us. Mrs. Pimpernel held out her black-gloved hand: it annoyed me, somehow, that her gloves were always of shiny kid, and never of *Suède*.

"How do you do?" she said. "You are in good time. Let me introduce you to your charge, Miss Wynne. Hester, this is Mrs. Loveday, and I hope you will not give her more trouble than you can help."

Now it was disconcerting to be presented in the light of a naughty child to a person in whose company I was about to pass a month; the unfairness of it provoked me to rebellion, and I answered in a manner which I meant to be casual, but which breathed more, I fear, of defiance: "It depends of course upon how we get on."

I felt, before the words were well out of my mouth, that it was a rude speech; but it was all Mrs. Pimpernel's fault, I told myself; and now this Mrs.—what was her name?—Loveday would be prejudiced against me from the very beginning, and prepared to

take my guardian's unflattering views of all that I did or suffered. Suffered? No! I should not suffer, at any rate while I was away—not, at least, in the way in which I had suffered lately; all that would be left behind in London, and no other suffering could try me in the same way. We were in the train now, comfortably settled, and Mrs. Pimpernel was standing at the door of the compartment, holding out a shiny black hand for the final farewell.

"Good-bye," she said; "I hope——"

"Stand back, ma'am," cried the guard, and the train began to move, and we glided out of the station, leaving my godmother and her half-finished sentence on the platform. I breathed a sigh of relief: already I tasted freedom in the air: mystery lay behind and health and security before me. If only I had not prejudiced my companion against me at the start! I looked across at her. Should we be friends or not, I wanted to know. A middle-aged, somewhat tired, somewhat expressionless face confronted me. Staid Mrs. Loveday undoubtedly was; not unkindly, not too intelligent; yet not unobservant either, for I felt as I turned to take her measure that she also had been taking stock of me.

"You don't look over strong," she remarked presently.

"I'm not, I suppose," I answered, "though I don't often have things the matter with me."

She smiled slightly. Nervous prostration is quite enough to have the matter with one, I should say."

"But I don't have nervous prostration," I said.

"Don't you? I understood——"

"At least," I went on, without leaving her time to finish her sentence, "I'm not the least prostrate."

It occurred to me then that I didn't really understand what she was talking about.

"What *is* nervous prostration?" I asked.

She hesitated.

"Well, it has to do with the nerves, you know. The nerves get out of order, and—and people fancy things, and——"

"I see," I said.

I saw several things: one was that Mrs. Loveday was not overburdened either with tact or discretion; another was that I had been represented to her as being full of fancies—"half an idiot," as I expressed it to myself. Oh, well, it didn't much matter, I reflected, so long as she was good-natured, and that I was inclined to think she was.

The train sped onward, out into the open country. My spirits rose: the streets of houses seemed to my imagination like arms which had imprisoned me; and now, rushing through the stretching fields, I felt that I was free. I began to enjoy everything; the movement of the train, the sandwiches and cake provided for luncheon, the scenery, the novelty of my circumstances, the pictures of our destination which fancy painted for me.

At last we reached the little wayside station where we were to get out—Gullington it was called—and I remember the delicious feel and taste of the air as I drew it in in deep breaths immediately upon alighting. A ramshackly waggonette was in waiting for us, and we drove away with our luggage piled around us on the seats and floor of the vehicle. Reader, I shall never forget that drive. The November afternoon was drawing to its close; mist came hand in hand with the darkness, shrouding the hills and valleys and making even the near distances dim; and

low in the sky a little feeble moon, gazing at us between the heights, sent forth a silvery welcome. It was so still, so fresh, so peaceful; and so mysterious withal; not with the oppressive mystery that had strained my nerves in South Kensington, but with the sweet mysteriousness which is one of the many garments in Nature's wardrobe, and which she chooses often for her eventide array. The road wound ever upward; in the growing darkness the stars began to show themselves, and we seemed to rise towards them. By-and-by I saw that the hedges ceased, and away to the left the skyline met the earth on my own level. That dark undulating stretch must be moorland, surely. I spoke to the driver.

"Are we on a moor?"

He told me that we were, on a moor that extended miles and miles; and my heart rose higher, for moorland was as my native land to me. I don't know whence I drew my love for it, for I was born in London, and had no childhood's recollections to serve as its foundation. Perhaps it came from some far off ancestor, bred between heath and sky; perhaps in some long past existence I had formed part of what now appealed to me with strange, persistent strength. Anyhow a moor was my ideal of the country, and to dwell near or upon one fulfilled my utmost desires after peace and freedom. We descended again a little, and paused before a creaking gate; the driver held it open while we passed through, and let it swing on its hinges behind us. We alighted on a little gravel path, and, guided by a woman with a lantern, found ourselves presently in a low, fairly spacious room, with oak beams for ceiling, an old-fashioned open fireplace, and wide windows, covered now by curtains of deep red. I liked my new habitation; I

liked the sombre cheerfulness of the dark wood, the brightly coloured curtains and the glow from the log fire; and I turned to Mrs. Loveday and said:

“Don’t you think you will be happy here?”

She smiled the little impassive smile I afterwards got to know very well, and said she hoped so.

Upstairs our two bedrooms were side by side: each contained a four-poster bed, which left not too much space for the rest of the furniture; but in one the window looked towards the valley, in the other across the moor. I learned this from our hostess, for it was now too dark to distinguish even the outlines of the surrounding country; and as Mrs. Loveday did not care which view her window gave her, I chose the room overlooking the moor for my own.

I slept well that night in my big bed, soothed by the stillness and the pure strong air; and I rose in the morning, full of energy, prepared to enjoy to the utmost each minute of the month before me.

CHAPTER IX.

I PAUSE IN MY READING AND OPEN THE DOOR.

A WEEK passed by. I felt a different being from the nervous timorous creature, to whom night came in a garb of fear. My sleep was sound now, and sweet; I ate the plain farmhouse fare with good appetite; and never a day passed without my going for a long ramble across the moor, either alone, or accompanied by Mrs. Loveday. At first she had appeared always to wish to go with me; but as the days went by she relaxed the supervision which she at first exercised, and as she was not a very good walker, I more often than not, made my expeditions alone. We were very good friends, Mrs. Loveday and I. She was not a particularly interesting companion, but neither was she a disagreeable one, and our relations, though not intimate, were perfectly amicable. She gave me the impression of having had rather a hard life, and of being glad of a space of rest, and, thinking thus of her, I tried to do what I could to make the days pleasant and peaceful. I was reading at that time Mrs. Gaskell's "Life of Charlotte Brontë," and, surrounded as I was by moorland, solitary as were my days, and limited as was my companionship, the lives of the sisters presented themselves to my imagination with a strength of reality which made me feel as if I had lived or

were living actually in their midst. I spoke about the book—I could not but speak of it, so prominent was it in my thoughts—to Mrs. Loveday; and having aroused her interest by my enthusiasm, I volunteered to read aloud to her in the evenings, while she worked, the story of “Jane Eyre,” a book she had never read. She seemed to have read very little, indeed, and now her time was passed chiefly in the manufacture of under-clothing. I asked her one day at the beginning of our sojourn in the farmhouse, whether she belonged to the Missionary Sewing League, but she said no, that she had no time to work for leagues, and that the garments she was making now were for her own use. She was pleased to be read to though, and I was delighted to see her interest and excitement grow each evening as the tale went on.

We were sitting thus, I reading, she working, when the calm which had been mine during the last fortnight was again broken in upon. I was reading the scene in which Rochester, disguised as a gipsy, interviews Jane.

“I like to observe all the faces, and all the figures,” I read aloud, and then suddenly I stopped.

Mrs. Loveday looked up. “What is the matter?” she asked, in a quicker way than was her wont.

“Nothing,” I answered; then I lowered my voice, and spoke in a whisper. “There is someone at the door, listening, watching. I am sure of it.”

She was about to speak again, but I stopped her with a gesture, and with an effort I continued my reading. With what an effort! How hard it was to keep my voice steady, and the note of apprehension out of it! Apprehension! Yes, reader; the old strange sense that had come upon me first that even-

ing as I drove along by the sea in Ireland, that had risen up again and again in London, precursing always some uncanny event, had stolen over me once again, here in the Derbyshire farmhouse, far away from the scenes where fear had dogged me, far away from anything which might suggest or recall my dreaded experiences, in surroundings where I felt myself free, and at a time when my nerves were recovering tone and my body had regained its health. I read on for five minutes or so and then I stopped.

"I am tired," I said.

I rose and went across to the door, and flung it wide open. There was nobody, nothing there: only the wind, entering with a moan through a slit between the outer door and its frame, stirred the hair upon my forehead.

"There is nobody," I said, and my own voice sounded strange to me; there was a sort of moan in it, like an echo of the sound in the wind. I know that as I stood there, the consciousness that the mystery and strangeness which haunted my life had followed me even here, was in my heart like pain, and I suppose the pain was in my utterance. Mrs. Loveday followed me.

"Miss Wynne," she said soothingly, "you should fight against these fancies."

"Look!" I said, and I held the candle aloft. "Don't you see that the outer door is open?"

She was startled for the moment, but: "It may not have been properly closed," she said, and then begged me to come back into the room.

I was willing enough; my enemy had gone, for the time at any rate, I knew; the open door told me as much, and the passing away of that sense of dread which I had come to look upon as a danger signal.

I sat down near the fire and looked into the flames. A great depression was upon me; I felt lonely, disheartened and afraid. Mrs. Loveday watched me for a while in silence, but at last she addressed me, and almost in the same words that she had used previously.

"Miss Wynne," she said in her quiet voice, "you should not give way to these fancies."

I raised my eyes and met hers.

"So you think it fancy—really?" I said.

"Of course. You have done perhaps too much to-day. That long walk in the teeth of the wind——"

"I have walked as far, and against a wind as strong," I interrupted, "many a day before this."

"Yes, but perhaps I have not been wise in letting you run the risk of over fatigue. I have usually, with my patients——"

Again I broke in upon her. "Patients? are you a nurse? or what?"

She coloured slightly. "I was a nurse before I married."

An idea occurred to me. "Are you a nurse no longer?" I asked. My eyes were upon her and she could not evade the question.

"Since my widowhood I have taken to it again."

"It is as a nurse that you are here with me?" I continued.

I knew that she was conscious of having made a slip, and in a way I was sorry for her—she looked so desperately uncomfortable; but I was determined to have the truth.

She hesitated, and then said: "Yes, in a sort of way. Mrs. Pimpernel told me that you were very much out of health and needed a great deal of care and looking after."

I thought a minute. "Did she tell you I imagined things which were not true? that I had in fact, delusions?"

Again Mrs. Loveday hesitated.

"You may just as well tell me the truth," I said.

"She hinted something of the kind."

"She hinted in fact that I was not quite sane."

"You put it too strongly, Miss Wynne. Not that, but that your nerves were out of order, and your mind in consequence a little—a little——"

"I see," I said scornfully. "It comes to the same thing."

I turned my eyes to the fire; I had a great deal to think about, and my thoughts were more despondent than ever. By-and-by I turned again to my companion.

"I want you to tell me something," I said. "Can I trust you to speak the truth?"

I did not dislike the glance she gave me; it was kindly, though I seemed to feel in it an element of professional observation.

"I would rather tell you the truth than falsehoods," she replied.

"Then tell me," I went on; "do I seem to you as if my mind were off its balance?"

"You do not," she answered promptly, "and until this evening——"

"Ah, this evening," I said. "You think my fear just now, my conduct altogether, unreasonable."

"I saw no cause for fear," she answered, "and I cannot conceive who, in this remote spot, should either watch or wish to injure you."

"Nor can I," I returned, "and I had hoped——"

There I stopped, and indeed I could not have gone on without my voice breaking. Ah reader, I

had hoped so much. I had hoped that here in Derbyshire I had escaped altogether from the perils of London; I had hoped that my fears would prove themselves to be really but the outcome of unstrung nerves; I had hoped that I should be able to trace my past experiences to the influences of indigestion and nightmare. And now? Now they were all real to me again, and I said to myself: "Is there no escape?" Presently I pulled myself together. If Mrs. Loveday was right, if Jesse and Mrs. Pimpernel and Beta were all right, and my nerves and mind were the cause of my sufferings, the only way was to fight my fears, and I made up my mind that I would not be a coward and sink beneath them. It was early yet, and I proposed to Mrs. Loveday to go on with the reading; and I read arduously, nailing my thoughts and attention to the book, till it was ten o'clock, and the candles were brought in. The effort brought its reward; by bedtime I had recovered my self-control, and when I parted from Mrs. Loveday at my bedroom door, I felt that I was once again mistress of myself.

CHAPTER X.

THE GROPING HANDS.

THERE was a small fire burning in my room ; the nights were chilly, and I, who felt the cold, was glad of the crackling logs to undress by, as well as of the cheerful glow which they shed throughout the room. To-night, though, I was conscious of a current of cold air. Whence did it come ? The curtains swayed slightly. I went over to the window and drew them apart, and then I saw that the casement was unfastened. I pushed it wider open and looked out. The night was gloomy ; banks of cloud hid the moon, and a low wind wandered over the moor with a note of desolation as though it longed for shelter. I stood looking into the unquiet darkness. The subtle moods of nature and the night have always had a strange attraction for me ; when the ordinary world is stilled or shut away, as in solitude or darkness, it is as if a voice out of the eternal heart of things uttered itself in wordless speech to mine ; it is as if the barriers that limit consciousness were lowered and I were at one with the universal life. On gray, sad days or when the sunlight has been glad in solitary places, when twilight or moonlight or the dawn has found me alone, then this sense of mystical intercourse has often come to me, and I have seemed to feel the spirit of nature and to

enter into its being. So it was to-night. The wind told me of the long ages through which it had roamed the earth; the darkness told me of the mournfulness it held, and the rest; and from the moor which I could not see, there rose up emanations of patience and of strength. Just outside the window a cherry tree waved its branches close to my face, and the thought came to me how easy it would be to clamber into it from the sill: if a bright day came, I resolved, I would spend a portion of it there. How long I stood looking out, I know not; but at last I drew back into the room, fastened the casement and began to undress; unwillingly, for I knew that when I withdrew from the scene outside, the horror would be waiting for me. I had felt it the instant I had closed my door; it lurked somewhere in the room; its influence was upon me. I fought against it, desperately, determinedly, foolishly; yes, foolishly, for I know now that the thing I sought to stifle, was an added sense, marvellously given to deliver me from evil. I fought against it with powerful arguments, bringing reason with all her forces into a province which was not hers; and, in the end, I conquered. The human mind, I suppose, can always conquer fear, if determination be strong enough; but it is wiser, believe me, to bring about its destruction only when its cause is definite and obvious; when fear comes unheralded and without excuse, it were well to heed its message.

I drew the fire together before I got into bed; blue, sportive flames leaped about the logs, and lent me courage as I lay; and with the strong air of the moor to weight my eyelids and the fatigue of my long ramble paving the way for rest, I fell asleep while yet the firelight held the darkness at bay. I

was used to dreaming, but mostly of fleeting, dimly presented scenes which left little trace upon my consciousness. It was not often that my dream experiences were defined and clear, but to-night I had a dream which was startlingly vivid. I dreamed that I was about to be hanged. I stood beneath a gallows; all around me were crowds of people, antagonistic, clamouring for my death. The hangman stood before me; already the rope was about my neck; I knew that in a minute it would be drawn tight, and I should be swinging in mid air: but as yet the pressure of it was but slight; I could just feel it about my throat, and the touch of the hangman's hands as he adjusted the knot. Those hands pressed down, wandered from windpipe to chest; the suspense was intolerable and I raised my own hands in an effort to free myself. Suddenly the crowd disappeared; everything was in darkness; I saw nothing, not even the hangman's face; only I still struggled to free myself from his grasp. And then the horror of my dream gave way to a greater horror; for I was awake, lying in my bed; there were real strong hands at my throat, groping, groping. Whether I had moved in my sleep I know not, but now I struggled impulsively, making an effort to spring up in the bed.

"Lie still!" a voice said, whispering but distinct.

Reader, for perhaps a quarter of a minute I lay still, while those damp hands busied themselves about my throat, and then the horror, the storm of revolt that possessed me found vent in one wild scream. There was a moment's pause, then the flinging open of a door and hurrying feet in the passage outside. The hands left my throat; the curtains of the window were torn apart, and somebody, some-

thing, wrestled with the hasp of the casement. As my own door was burst open, the candle in Mrs. Loveday's hand was blown out by the draught from the window, and I, sitting upright in my bed, and she, standing on the threshold, saw only by the scanty light of the half veiled moon, a figure that for an instant blocked the casement's space and disappeared into the night.

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Loveday, groping in the darkness.

"A light—get a light!" I cried.

She found the matches and struck one.

"Did you see?" I asked. "Mrs. Loveday, did you see?"

Her eyes answered me.

"Was it my fancy?" I said, "or was it real?"

"It was real," she whispered.

I rocked myself to and fro, moaning. "Real," I said, "all real," and the certainty of reality came upon me as an agony; for what, I thought, can be the meaning and end of it all?

Mrs. Loveday was as much upset as I.

"Who is it?" she asked. "Have you any idea, any theory, who or what it can be?"

"No, no," I said, "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know."

I repeated my words again and again, speaking rather to myself than to her, assuring myself of my own ignorance, or seeking rather such assurance: for, reader, the figure that had paused for a moment, dimly visible in the moonlight, bore an aspect that had seemed familiar; but I would not, I *would not* own that such a thing could be.

CHAPTER XI.

I FEAR AN ENEMY AND FIND A FRIEND.

THE next morning we did not stir out of the house. Mrs. Loveday was full of sympathy, anxious, compassionate, alarmed; and I told her—and oh how glad I was to speak freely of my troubles and my dread—all the strange things that for the last two months had befallen me. I kept from her only my suspicions as to the identity of the figures I had seen; for how could I put into words that which I dared not admit even to myself? One little strain of satisfaction ran through my unhappiness, that I had proved myself to be reasonable in my fears; yet the satisfaction was dearly bought, for hitherto I had been able to persuade myself—at times at any rate—that fancy was my chief tormentor, whereas now I had no ground of refuge left. Foreboding pressed hard upon me, and that chilling sense of mystery struck me with a cold dismay. I knew not what I had to fear, nor how to cope with the danger that certainly yet so unaccountably threatened me, and I had no friend I could confide in and upon whose strength I could rely.

“Could you not tell all this to Mrs. Pimpernel?” Mrs. Loveday suggested.

I answered her with a laugh, “Mrs. Pimpernel!”

“Or, has she not a son?” she went on; and my laugh became a shudder.

After our early dinner I proposed a walk. Mrs. Loveday hesitated. The adventure of the night had made her timid, and it was I who had now to take the initiative, it was I who had to play the part of protector. She consented at last to accompany me, and we set out. We forsook the moor to-day and struck down towards the valley, where the autumn seemed more advanced, or was only more noticeable, perhaps, than on the heather-covered hill. The trees were nearly bare, and the leaves lay shrivelled, crackling beneath our feet: just below nestled the gray walls and roof of Leamwell Hall, and half-way up the opposite height lay the little homestead, called, I was told, in the country round, the Abode of Peace. Peaceful enough it looked with its curling wreath of smoke, and its shortcomings, if it had any, curtained by the distance, and great grew the longing in my heart for the calm that seemed to encompass it. But it was far from where we walked, separated from us by the valley's breadth and depth; and very far was I, though happily I knew it not, from any abiding place which held the charm of peace.

Presently the sun broke through the veil of cloud and the gray day smiled; colour sprang out upon the sparse-leaved trees, and the grass took on a more vivid green. My spirits rose, cheered by the burst of brightness, and, youth being strong within me—for I was but twenty-two, it must be remembered—I was soon chatting merrily to Mrs. Loveday, forgetting fears and forebodings in the pleasure of the moment. We followed the winding road through the grounds of Leamwell Hall down into Gullington village, and took our way to the little post-office, to see if the second post had brought us any letters, for there was but one delivery in the day up at the

farm. There was a letter from Beta, and I read it as we strolled back slowly up the hill.

"I miss you dreadfully," she wrote, "and there isn't even the excitement of ghosts now you are away." (Oh Beta, Bea, if you only knew!) "He came yesterday" (I knew of course who *he* meant) "and it went off as well as could be expected. Mother was very missionary, but he fitted into her as well as he could, and told her a lot of things about the interior of Africa she didn't know. Of course she hasn't asked him to anything, but he is going to the Parkers' At Home, so there is that to look forward to. I was rather glad Jesse was away, because he's always so dreadfully sharp, and often so disagreeable, and he might have set Mother against him. Jesse's gone to the north or the south—near Bristol, wherever that is—south, I suppose, isn't it? and Mother has looked very glum ever since. Jesse's little finger is more to her than my whole body, I know, but I don't mind—I don't mind anything as long as he cares and you don't forget me and don't stay away for ever."

Beta's style was rather confused and the various *he's* might have puzzled anybody but me; but I was used to her letters and quite prepared to jump from brother to lover without more decided indication of the different persons than she was accustomed to give.

So Jesse was away, at Bristol. The news suggested much and set me wondering, and I was silent most of the way home, thinking over Beta's letter.

In the evening I spoke to Mrs. Loveday about my coming of age."

"I suppose people can do as they like," I said, "when they are of age."

"But are you not of age already?" she asked.
"I understood from Mrs. Pimpernel——"

"Oh, I am over twenty-one," I said, "I'm twenty-two; but I don't come of age, as far as getting possession of my money goes till I'm twenty-three. I wonder what I shall do!"

I did not like the idea of leaving Beta, but yet it seemed impossible that I should stay on at South Kensington, imperative that I should seek another home. And Beta might marry; probably would, I thought, so I need hardly consider her; and besides, her mother would most likely want to get rid of me as soon as possible. Surely she would; otherwise——

"Mrs. Loveday," I said suddenly; "I have an idea that my guardian hates me."

"My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Loveday, "what a very shocking thing to think!"

"I think so, though," I went on musingly, "I think she must want to drive me from her house."

Mrs. Loveday looked at me with such a bewildered expression that I began to laugh.

"Do you still think my mind is affected?" I enquired.

She took my question quite seriously.

"No, no, my dear," she said gravely, "but I think you have gone through a great deal of a kind that would naturally upset you, and now you may be apt to take up with exaggerated ideas."

"I can't otherwise explain it," I said, pondering.

"I can't explain or attempt to explain anything," Mrs. Loveday said, "but I do think it would be a pity if you were to take it into your head that your guardian dislikes you."

I said nothing more. I had my own ideas on the

subject; they had never been in the direction of crediting Mrs. Pimpernel with a warm affection for me, and now I felt more than ever convinced that I was right.

That night passed quietly and without unusual incident, and the next morning was so bright that foreboding was banished and the world seemed in its normal condition again. I went out in the morning with Mrs. Loveday, and in the afternoon set off for a ramble over the moor; alone, for my companion was tired and said she would prefer to stay in the house and rest. How beautiful the day was! and the moor, as it ran on and on! The purple had gone with the autumn days, but the brown, undulating expanse—the land-sea, as I used to call it—with its low horizon, had a charm of its own which lack of colour could not destroy. And colour indeed was there; not brilliant as in September days, but tender and delicate, if also sober and sad. I hurried on breathlessly; I wanted to get to a certain spot that I called my throne, because it rose above the surrounding level and commanded the whole sweep of the moor; and my eagerness to reach it made me heedless of my rapid pace. At last I was there, and panting, threw myself on the heather to rest. I lay in a sweet content; I loved the solitude and the silence of the vast unbroken space, and so near was I to the sky that its vastness seemed attainable. I had wandered off into a land remote from both sky and earth, a sort of dreamland, where thought was dim and fancy played with shadows, when my sense of hearing set me in the real world again. There was movement in the heather; somebody or something was coming towards me. I stood up and looked around; a bird perhaps or a rabbit made the sound, for I could

see nothing ; but then, as I reflected, the hollows between the hillocks were deep enough to shield a fellow traveller from my view. The day was waning now, and being once roused from my reverie, I began to think it was time to retrace my steps. I had been facing the sun ; now, when I turned I met a darkening sky, and somehow the change from the radiance to the sober easterly aspect cast a shadow on my mood. The scene seemed suddenly dreary, and a longing came to me to be safe in the shelter of the house again. I set off quickly ; I wanted to run, but I would not run, for I felt that panic was at my heels, and that if once I broke my pace, it would urge me to headlong flight. From what ? Indeed I did not know, yet felt that I must flee. On I went, doggedly, fighting my own impulse, knowing of no pursuer, yet feeling that I was pursued. I reached the edge of the moor and took the road ; on one side the heath bordered it, on the other a hedge. I was not very far away from the farmhouse now, and my panic calmed itself : I walked more leisurely, giving my heart time to steady its beats. Then in the hedge close to me I heard a rustling, a breaking of twigs, and it seemed to me that a man's form forced its way through the close grown screen. But I did not wait to see ; with one bound I was off, and, my short skirts giving my limbs free play, with my utmost speed I covered the road's descending length, and in half a score of rushing palpitating minutes had reached the shelter of the farm. Once safe within the gate I stood and looked back ; the road was empty ; in the dusk I saw no moving thing. I entered the house ; Mrs. Love-day was not in the sitting-room, and I thought that before going upstairs I would have another look along the road. I stood again by the gate ; still soli-

tary the road was and—no, stay; something moves, approaches,—lingeringly, with pauses, close beside the hedge. I waited; it was a man, and he came slowly nearer. That he should be there was in no way remarkable, for people occasionally took that road on their way to Lyam, and besides, with the farm labourers so near at hand that their voices reached me where I stood, I had no ground for fear: indeed it was not fear, I think, which impelled me to hide myself behind the laurels, but some odd feeling in which curiosity played a considerable part. The man came on and I watched him through a space amidst the branches; and when he was near he became familiar to me; and when he was quite close, I thought to myself:

“He is not at Bristol, then, after all.”

Then I stepped forward from behind the bush, and said aloud: “Jesse!”

CHAPTER XII.

I LOSE MY TEMPER AND BARRICADE MY DOOR.

JESSE PIMPERNEL gave a little jump. "My dear Hester," he exclaimed, "how you startled me! Pray is your habit to spring forth upon your friends from behind bushes?"

"Oh, no," I returned hastily, "only I didn't know you."

"Then how did you come to address me by my name?"

"Oh, I did of course, then; I mean before—when you were a long way off."

"It's strangers you take stock of then from your spy-hole?"

"Till I see if they *are* strangers."

"Well, little Hester," he said, turning full towards me, "and how have you been getting on?"

"Extremely well," I answered.

"Isn't it kind of me to come and see? Aren't you grateful to me?"

"Beta said you were at Bristol," I replied. He shook his head.

"Not grateful at all, evidently, and hasn't even the grace to pretend she is. Aren't you the very least bit glad to see me?"

"I didn't expect you, you see," I said.

"And I'm so glad to see *you*," he went on re-

proachfully. "I've thought a great deal about you, little Hester, you know."

"So have I," I said, "about you."

"Have you?" He gave me a quick glance. "In what kind of way?"

"Oh, I don't know," I answered carelessly; "wondered what you were doing and that kind of thing."

"Not very much. The house was awfully dull after you went—not even a ghost since you were not there to be haunted. That's why I went to Bristol; and that's why I left Bristol and came all the way to this desolate world's edge. Jove! what a dreary hole! I wonder how mother heard of it."

"I like it," I said. "It's a beautiful place."

We had moved gradually along the path and now had reached the entrance door. It was dark inside, but Jesse walked straight in and found his way unhesitatingly to the sitting-room.

"How did you know where to go?" I asked.

"Oh, all these houses are built on the same plan; one can't make a mistake."

I thought to myself that the construction of old farmhouses varied considerably, but I did not say so. "Where are you staying?" I asked.

"Nowhere at all. I can put up here, I suppose, can't I? I left my luggage at the station—what I have of it, with orders that it should be sent up if I were not back by seven o'clock."

"I don't know whether Mrs. Milling can give you a room," I said doubtfully.

"Perhaps you will go and see—when you have introduced me to Mrs. Loveday."

Mrs. Loveday had entered the room while I was speaking. I made the required introduction and

withdrew. Now I did not want Jesse to stay at the farm; I was angry at his coming; why couldn't I be left in peace? I said to myself: consequently when I went to ask about a room, I tried in a sort of a way to suggest to Mrs. Milling that she could not let me have one. But it was of no use; there was the little room at the back, she said, and if the gentleman didn't mind it being a bit lumbered up, she could soon get it ready for him.

"It's very small, isn't it?" I was beginning, when I heard a voice behind me.

"The little room at the back will do excellently," it said, "and the gentleman doesn't at all mind lumber."

Jesse had stolen upstairs without my hearing him, and now took matters into his own hands, so there was nothing more to be said.

We had tea together, the three of us, and Jesse entertained Mrs. Loveday with stories of his life in America. I had never heard him talk so well before; he had considerable power of description and was able to make his pictures vivid and interesting. I could see that he impressed Mrs. Loveday by his ability, and I, also, did not entirely escape the influence of the charm he chose to exert. But after tea I stole away to my own room, lighted the fire there and crouched down beside it. I did not intend to be charmed by Jesse, nor did I wish him to think that I was particularly glad to see him. What his motives might be in coming to the farm, I could not tell, but I was resolved to be on my guard and would not allow myself to be cajoled or flattered by him. Shortly before supper Mrs. Loveday came into my room.

"Dear Miss Wynne," she said, "I am so glad

to find what a kind friend you have in Mr. Pimpernel."

"Indeed!" I said coldly.

"Yes, and he is so interested in you in every way. We have had quite a long talk about you."

My indifference vanished. "What have you been saying?" I asked quickly.

"We have been talking over your troubles, and he is so distressed——"

To Mrs. Loveday's utter astonishment I leapt to my feet and threw out my hands with a despairing gesture. "Good God!" I exclaimed, "why couldn't you have held your tongue?"

"My dear Miss Wynne," she began, dismayed and half offended.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," I broke in, "I ought not to have spoken like that. But if you knew!" I took a turn up the room. What did he say? What did you tell him? Tell me all—everything," I said.

"We were just speaking of all the—the trying experiences you have had, and he was so sympathetic and so grieved for you. He was inclined—naturally enough of course—to put it all down to fancy and the state of your health; but when I told him about the other night——"

"Oh, you told him that?" I put in.

"Yes, I hope you—I had no idea you would mind, Miss Wynne," Mrs. Loveday said timidly.

"Well, well, never mind! What did he say?"

"He said that he saw the matter was more serious than he had thought; and indeed, indeed, Miss Wynne, he seemed very deeply concerned."

I laughed, a bitter little laugh enough. "Oh, I dare say," I said. Mrs. Loveday stood silent and hesitating, then:

"I think you are a little unjust to him," she said tentatively. "He might help you, you know, and I'm quite sure he wants to."

"Perhaps," I answered meditatively, "perhaps you are right." I began to think that perhaps she really was, that I did Jesse an injustice, that the terrors I had suffered had upset my good judgment, my sense faculties, my whole physical and mental equipment, and that I had jumped too hastily to conclusions. I would hold my fancy with a firmer rein, I resolved, and I went downstairs to supper, prepared to regard my visitor in a more favourable light. I confess I found it somewhat difficult to maintain my friendly feeling throughout the evening, for much that Jesse said and did jarred upon and irritated me. After supper he drew his chair up close to mine.

"Little Hester," he said, "I hear you have had an adventure."

My eyes were bent on my knitting and I did not answer him. "I should have put it down to the seeing eyes," he went on, "to more spooks and bug-bears, except," and his voice grew grave, "that Mrs. Loveday tells me she saw it too."

"Saw what?" I enquired, though of course I knew what he alluded to, and that he was aware too that I knew.

"The burglar—murderer—the person, whoever he was, who first tried to throttle you and then made his escape out of the window."

"Perhaps Mrs. Loveday has fancies too," I said.

"Don't be angry with me because I have sometimes thought you over-imaginative," he pleaded, "but tell me, was it anybody you could at all recognise? anybody about the farm?"

"I am quite sure it was nobody about the farm."

"But you did see him?"

"Not his face."

"No, but the figure, the outline, as he sprang through the window."

"Yes, in a sort of way."

"And it was quite unknown to you?"

I hesitated. Should I keep my own counsel? I bent my head. "Quite," I said.

"It must have been some tramp," Jesse went on thoughtfully; "or a wandering lunatic, perhaps. Oh, Hester, I am glad to think I am here to-night to protect you."

"Thank you," I said. "And now, suppose we change the subject. I've had quite enough of it, I assure you, the last two days."

"I dare say you have, poor little Hester, and it's got on your nerves. What shall we talk about?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"Do you still wear your locket?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Why, of course?"

"You know I can't take it off," I said, irritably enough I dare say, for the subject, as I have already said, was rather a sore one with me.

"You could if you liked," said Jesse.

"How, pray?"

"Oh, there must be a way of unfastening it."

"There is no way. I've often looked."

"I should have it filed, if I were you. It's so ridiculous."

I felt it to be ridiculous, and therefore his words vexed me.

"You may think so," I returned, "but seeing

that it was my mother's wish, I intend to continue the absurdity."

"Pooh!" he said, "she only did it to prevent your losing it while you were a child—why, you were a mere baby when she died—and never could have intended you to go on being chained up like a slave for ever. Or if she did, it's such a preposterous idea, that you are equally preposterous to give in to it."

"That's as it may be," I said, "but I certainly shall not have the chain taken off, however preposterous you may think me."

"I wish you would," he said with sudden earnestness. "I wish you'd let me file it through for you."

I shook my head.

"Little Hester," he repeated, "I wish you'd let me."

"Why?" I asked. "I don't see how it can make any difference to you if I wear a dozen chains."

"It does," he said, "it will, it must."

His tone was so peculiar that I turned and looked at him, and the expression of his face puzzled me too, so pleading was it, yet so set.

"I don't understand you at all!" I said. "The matter is so trivial, that I cannot understand how it can possibly affect you."

He bent towards me. "Leave understanding on one side. I speak for your good, Hester. Be guided in this by me."

The strangeness of his manner affected me; I was tempted to yield to him; but something—my native obstinacy perhaps—held me back.

"If you would but tell me what you mean, why you are so anxious about it!" I said. He uttered an exclamation, then checked himself.

"Perhaps I, too, have seeing eyes," he said in

a lighter tone. "Perhaps I know that misfortune is linked with that chain, that it will bring you ill luck, that by freeing yourself from it, you will avoid an evil destiny."

Somehow his words impressed me, and I could not repress a shudder as he spoke. He saw his advantage.

"Hester, little Hester, are you going to give in to me?" he said. His eagerness, the shade of triumph in his voice, his calling me little Hester, combined to work a reaction in my mood and to fix my resolution in another way than the one he sought. I rose hastily from my chair and moved towards Mrs. Loveday.

"No, I am not," I declared emphatically. Jesse shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it's not worth quarrelling about," he said with sudden nonchalance, and then, after a few remarks to Mrs. Loveday, he left the room, saying he was going outside to smoke. I was glad when he was gone; somehow his presence oppressed me, and the persistency with which he had urged me to remove my chain, seemed to me both tiresome and unwarrantable.

"He may be well-meaning enough," I said to Mrs. Loveday, "but he is certainly a bore"; and my remark gave her a considerable shock, for she was disposed to look upon him as a remarkably entertaining and agreeable person.

"Well, at any rate you will feel safe to-night, knowing you have a protector in the house," she remarked presently.

Nevertheless, when I went to bed, I barricaded my door. Until the night of my adventure, I had contented myself, the lock being worn and rusty,

with closing the door simply with the latch, but since then I had piled furniture within the threshold, to prevent, or at least to warn me of, the entrance of an intruder.

“You lock your door, of course?” Jesse asked when he said good-night.

“No,” I answered, “but I take precautions.”

I was glad I had taken the precautions, for that night, when all was still, I was awaked out of sleep by the crashing on the floor of the water bottle with which I had topped my barricade. The crash was succeeded by silence, undisturbed again till the morning; but I knew that my door had been tried.

CHAPTER XIII.

I FALL ASLEEP.

I WENT back to London with the weight of fear still heavy on my heart. All my hopes that change of air and surroundings would sweep the nightmare out of my life were crushed; I returned with suspicions strengthened, doubts confirmed, fancies—or what I had longed to prove to be fancies—made actual. It was a wrench to part with Mrs. Loveday; she was not superlatively interesting as a companion nor intelligent as a guide: but I felt that I could trust her loyalty and affection, and when I left her at the station I knew that I was leaving one who desired to shield me from evil.

Beta had a great deal of news for me. *He* (he being, of course, Captain Robert Lockwood) had been again, and Mrs. Pimpernel had not been particularly disagreeable, and Beta had had a really long talk with him at the Parker's At Home, and was quite sure that I would like him. I remarked that that was a minor point, but Beta looked so distressed at what she took for a want of interest, that I was obliged to declare that I liked him already from what she had told me about him, and that I was certain I should think him charming. I soon had an opportunity of judging, for a few days after my return to London, we met him at an afternoon

party. I knew him as soon as he came into the room, partly from his photograph, and partly from the colour in Beta's cheeks. He made his way gradually towards her in a markedly casual way which to my interested observing eyes, was but a thin veil to a set purpose. I was very proud of Beta and thought how nice she looked in the gray gown which I had baptized with my tears some five weeks since, and I felt very small and unfashionable when I saw her piloting the fair moustache, blue eyes and correct costume of her officer towards me. The men of Mrs. Pimpernel's acquaintance were of a distinctly dowdy type, and though, in my peeps at the London season, I beheld sometimes the inhabitants of a smarter world, I had had but little intercourse with people, either men or women, who were not in my guardian's set.

"Hester, Captain Lockwood," said Beta, pink and proud. "This is my very dear friend, Miss Wynne"; and then she blushed herself away, leaving me to talk to six feet of another girl's lover. I felt that I had not even one word to give to each of his inches, but Captain Lockwood soon put me at my ease. He began at once to talk about Beta, by asking how long we had known each other, and as I gave him every encouragement, he continued the theme till a young man who had a class in the Sunday school in which I taught, interrupted our conversation by his greeting.

"How do you like him?" Beta inquired eagerly as soon as we were safely upstairs after coming home.

"Oh, he's delightful, of course," I answered.

She saw the laughter in my eyes. "Oh, Hester, are you making fun?"

I made my face grave, knowing Beta's way of

thinking that laughter always meant mockery, whereas I often laughed because I was amused or merely content.

"My dear," I said, "I like him immensely, and I only wish you were going to be married to-morrow, that I might have him for my friend-in-law."

"Truly?" she questioned.

"Truly and seriously," I said.

"You are so fond of sort of talking nonsense, you know," she observed dubiously.

"Oh, let me sort of talk nonsense while I may," I cried. Certainly there was not much scope for nonsense in my life just then, and there was soon to be less.

The next day was Sunday, always a day of peculiar gloom in the Pimpernel household. Mrs. Pimpernel was more emphatically a Christian worker than even on Dorcas days; there was a great deal of church going, a great deal of boredom, an alteration in the hours of meals, and a paucity of vegetables. In the afternoon Beta and I taught in the Sunday school: she had a class of big girls; I had the infants. Oh, those infants! They stated in hymnal form that they were wandering sheep, that they did not love the fold, and would not be controlled, and the truth of their statements I weekly and bitterly proved. I tried to teach them Bible history, and they asked appalling questions which I was quite incapable of answering; I tried surreptitious secular tales, and the superintendent came to listen to my instruction; and between the upbraiding of my conscience, my desire to keep order, and the buoyant unregeneracy of these Christian lambs, as they were generally called in the concluding prayer, I was usually completely exhausted by the

time my attempts at teaching came to an end. That Sunday afternoon I remember I was particularly so; my head, too, was aching; and when we reached home and Beta had established herself by the fire with a book called "The Christian in the Home," I retired into the back part of the drawing-room, laid myself upon a sofa, and leaning my head upon the cushions, sought to still the pain in it by rest. It was considered idle and indicative of a reprehensible love of luxury, to lie down in the daytime; but Mrs. Pimpernel would not be back for another hour, I knew, from her Bible class, and by then I hoped to be better fitted to get through the rest of the day. It was quiet in there, shut off, or partly shut off, by the half drawn curtains, which took the place of folding doors; the dim light was soothing; and soon my tired eyes closed, and I fell asleep.

I slept I do not know how long, nor precisely what awaked me, but when I came back to consciousness a voice was speaking in the room beyond the curtains. I did not recognise the voice at first; I was sure it was not Beta's; but several moments passed before I knew it for her mother's. There was a strange sound in it, a sound I had never heard in it before; and to whom was she speaking?

"Susan," she said, "I will, oh, I will!"

Susan was my mother's name, and I wondered what could be the meaning of the words, and of the strained sound, as of pain, in the voice that uttered them. I sat up, my heart beating quickly; melting too, towards the woman whom trouble seemed to hold and overwhelm; the sound of my mother's name touched something in me which Mrs. Pimpernel hitherto had never touched, and I began to wonder if I could, and if I might dare, to help her.

Softly I slipped from my resting-place, and softly I stole towards the curtained space and halted in the opening between the velvet folds. Mrs. Pimpernel was standing in the middle of the room; her back was towards me; and somehow the sight of her, the familiarity of that well-known figure, brought uppermost the timid shrinking with which from my childhood she had inspired me, and I stood motionless, fearing to advance. She held a letter in her hand, and I noticed that the tall bureau in the far corner of the room, usually kept locked, stood open. Presently she sat down near the fire, unfolded the letter and read it through; then she leaned back in her chair, and stared into the grate. I could see her movements very distinctly, for the gas was lighted, and from the half darkness where I stood, the room was like a stage. In the Sunday stillness I caught some of her muttered words. "Poor fool!" she said, "poor silly, sentimental fool! Ah, you would have been wiser, Susan, to have trusted me all through!" So she sat for a time, and then, all of a sudden, stout and unwieldy as she was, she slipped down on her knees on to the hearthrug, and clasping her hands, raised them upward, above her head. Her attitude, unsuited as was her person for dramatic or pathetic expression, was ridiculous, and for a moment amusement threatened to overwhelm me; yet there was about her an element of such real suffering that my sense of the ludicrous was held in check, and in a sort of awed amazement I stood and watched her. She prayed aloud, in cant conventional phrases, phrases which I had often before heard from her lips, falling meaningless and dead: but now they seemed imbued with life and force; the life, I suppose, of genuine emotion, the force of actual conflict.

I began to feel, amidst my amazement, that I had no right to be watching her, no right to witness what I felt somehow to be the struggle of a soul; and I was about to withdraw when I heard a footstep descending the stairs. I knew Jesse's tread, I did not want to meet him, and I resolved to wait till he had gone by. I withdrew a step or two behind the curtain, and then I heard his hand on the door handle; not of the door of the front part of the room, but the one near which I stood. Quick as thought, but without thought, instinctively, I reached and crouched down behind the high-backed sofa where recently I had lain and which faced the opening into the larger room.

I have often wondered what would have happened, how much difference it would have made, if I had stood still that afternoon and so declared my presence. I do not know; anyhow, wondering is idle; for I did not show myself, but was hidden by the sofa's bulk, when the door softly opened and, in his usual silent way, Jesse stole into the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EVIL DREAM.

FOR half a minute or so, Jesse Pimpernel stood where I had stood, and watched his mother from between the curtains; then he advanced.

“What’s this?” I heard him say.

Mrs. Pimpernel’s voice stopped suddenly and I heard the rustle of her skirts as she rose to her feet. There followed words which I could not hear, and I thought that I could steal now to the door and make my exit unobserved. I was nearly there, safe hid behind the curtain, when I caught something which stopped me—the sound of my own name. I hesitated, then by a step or two I retraced the way I had come, and standing by the curtain’s edge, in the obscurity of the inner room, I watched and listened. I saw Jesse pick up the open letter from the hearth-rug, and heard him in a mocking voice begin to read it aloud.

“You will not be angry with me, dearest Clarissa, when you know what I have done, because when you read this, your poor Susan will be dead and there will be nothing but pity for her in your heart.” He broke off in his reading. “If there is one thing more pernicious than another on the face of this earth,” he said in the soft sarcastic tones that hurt so—I knew how they hurt—“it is a fool of a woman with money at her disposal.”

"I was afraid to tell you what I wished," he read on. "Afraid!" he ejaculated contemptuously.

"She was always afraid," Mrs. Pimpernel said, "always timid and afraid."

Jesse read the rest of the letter in silence; only towards the end he gave another sentence aloud. "And to show you that I trust you, I give it into your charge, knowing that my dearest Clarissa—" He broke off. "Her dearest Clarissa!" He paused a moment, and then, with his eyes on his mother's face: "Well?" he said.

"I will not, Jesse, I will not," Mrs. Pimpernel declared with rapid utterance. "You know that my love for Susan Wynne was the great love of my life, far dearer——"

"Oh, yes, I know, dearer than husband, daughter, father, mother, sisters; dearer, in fact, than everybody in the world——" Jesse made a just perceptible pause—"except me, Mother dear."

I saw my guardian's full, sallow face all troubled and drawn as she turned to him.

"Oh, Jesse, you are my all in all. But Susan—I can't, no, I can't."

"You must, Mother dear."

His *mother dear* gave me something of the same feeling as his *little Hester*, and I hated the smile that was on his face.

"When I think of her," Mrs. Pimpernel went on, "how fair and soft and gentle she was, with her timid ways and her trust, and her dying as she did, so young——"

"She might have lived longer perhaps, if you had let her marry the man she wanted to," Jesse put in.

"How could I let her marry him?" Mrs. Pim-

pernel demanded. Her whole manner changed. "A man like that? a drunkard, an unbeliever——"

"A little unorthodox, I suppose," Jesse again interpolated.

"A man with whom she never could have been happy. I was right, I maintain, and justified. God used me as his instrument."

"I dare say; but that's neither here nor there. The present question has not to do with Susan Wynne's matrimonial happiness, but with her——"

"It's no good, Jesse, I can't and won't agree to it," Mrs. Pimperl interrupted.

"Oh, yes," Jesse murmured softly, still with the smile.

"All my life I have been religious," she went on; "quite early God gave me His grace, and I have laboured for Him in the vineyard. I will be true to Him and to my trust, I——"

"You will ruin me. You know it's my only chance. Very well."

"Oh, Jesse!" My godmother's face, with the agony in it, gave me a pity I had never known till now.

"Oh, Jesse, I gave way to you once, against my conscience I gave way to you. I let you try, and you said yourself it was impossible."

"You must have known before I went that it was impossible."

"Jesse," said Mrs. Pimperl, "stay here. Don't go back! Stay here all your life and start afresh. I will give you all I can, all I have."

"Stay here, and be potted like a rook! No, thank you."

"But for a time then. If you will wait, it isn't long, wait till——" The voice sank and I

could not hear what it said. But I heard Jesse's reply.

"No, and I shouldn't mind if it were a certainty. She attracts me and I should like to break her spirit. But I must have certainty, and I might lose all. No, mother dear, there is no choice, and the time is getting on."

"January," Mrs. Pimpernel said.

"And this is the end of December. Mother, look here!" Jesse's voice changed from its soft mockery, and his face was set. He put his hands on his mother's shoulders and looked into her eyes. They stood sideways to me, and I could see the profiles of the two faces; I could see the anguish in hers and the little drops of moisture on her forehead, and I could see the grim look on his. I could not hear what he said to her; his voice never rose above a whisper, and she never answered or interrupted him till he had reached the very end of what he had to say. At last he took his hands from her shoulders and stood looking at her in silence. She tottered as she stood; the bulky ungraceful form swayed to and fro and seemed like to fall; the broad complacent face was drawn and changed: it was no longer the imperious dogmatic guardian, no longer the Christian worker, whom I beheld, but a woman in an agony of temptation, fighting for her own ideal of herself against a dread and a love which mastered her. Yes, mastered her; for when Jesse, standing there, with the smile dawning on his face again, said in his softest voice: "Well, mother dear?" I knew that she yielded to him. I knew it, not by any word she said, for she was silent; but by the pain in her eyes which I caught with mine as she turned ever so slowly from the spot where she had been standing, and by the

dry sobbing sound which escaped her lips as Jesse, the smile dominant now, crossed the room and left her alone. I waited till his steps died away and I heard the closing of his bedroom door on the floor above; and then at last I stole from my hiding place, out of the room, up the stairs, creeping, creeping, lest he should hear me pass, till, safe in my own room I burst from it into Beta's and clung to her all trembling and faint.

"Hester, for God's sake, Hester, what is it? what on earth is the matter?" she cried.

"Oh, the worst, the worst," was all I said. Indeed, I could not put into words the suspicions, the fear, the certainty of evil that possessed me.

"What *do* you mean? Oh, what is it? Are you mad?" Beta implored, terrified by my terror. And then in the midst of my agitation, the thought came clearly to me, that whatever happened I must not tell her what had passed; daughter, sister as she was—no, it was impossible.

"Perhaps I am mad," I said, "I have had a dream, a nightmare, a horrible, horrible dream." And then I loosed my arms from about her waist, and sank into a chair and leaned my head forward on my hands, and cried as if my heart would break.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DREAD SHADOWS ME.

I NEVER knew how I got through the rest of that day. Life seemed like an evil dream, and I felt giddy with the unreality and strangeness of it. We always went to church on Sunday evenings, and this evening we went as usual, Mrs. Pimpernel, Beta and I. Jesse stayed at home, according to his habit, and I caught a glimpse of him lounging back in an arm-chair smoking a cigar, as we passed the smoking-room door on our way out. Walking through the streets by my guardian's side, sitting next her in church, I could hardly bring myself to believe that the scene which I had witnessed that afternoon was actual. All trace of emotion had left her; her face wore its usual complacent impassivity; she joined in the hymns and responses with no falter or lack of force in her tuneless voice; during the walk home she discussed the sermon with the object of finding out whether we had been attending to it or not, in her wonted way.

Jesse, too, was just as he always was.

"Well, little Hester," he said, strolling up to me on our return, "tired of religious exercises?"

I don't know what induced me to answer him as I did; partly a nervous curiosity to see what effect my words would have upon him, partly the very

desire to avoid the subject, perhaps, impelling me towards it; but this is what I said:

"No, my sleep in the back drawing-room this afternoon quite freshened me up again."

"In the back drawing-room? And pray when were you asleep in the back drawing-room?"

There was no change in his face, but his voice vibrated in a way I was beginning to know, and I became intensely conscious of my own folly.

"Oh, after I came back from the Sunday school," I said as carelessly as I could. I knew he was watching me narrowly, though I did not look at him as I spoke; indeed I dared not, fearing that my eyes would betray me. But he would not let me off.

"Have you a headache?" he asked.

"Not the least."

"I can't trust you as regards your ailments. Let me see your eyes."

"What nonsense!" I exclaimed with an effort to maintain my ordinary manner. "I shall do no such thing."

"Look at me, little Hester," he said.

I felt that to refuse would be as hazardous as to obey, and with all my energy concentrated in the determination to hide from him what he sought to know, I raised my eyes and met his. Standing thus, gaze meeting gaze, he addressed his mother.

"Mother, do you know that Hester spent the afternoon asleep in the back drawing-room?"

"Impossible," my guardian said quickly.

"And I am sure she has a headache in consequence."

"On the contrary," I said, "I had a headache before, and the sleep cured it."

"How long were you asleep?" Mrs. Pimpernel asked.

"I don't know," I answered, "but I slept very soundly."

I had turned my eyes from Jesse's gaze before this, but I knew that he still observed me. I determined to outwit him, and I turned to him and lowered my voice. "Please don't say anything more about it," I implored.

He sank his voice to the level of mine. "Why?"

"Oh, because we're never supposed to lie down or go to sleep in the daytime: your mother thinks it's lazy."

"Oh, that's it, is it?"

I knew by his voice that I had disarmed his suspicions.

"All right, little Hester."

I had great difficulty in swallowing my supper (we had nine o'clock supper on Sundays); I felt that I did not want a mouthful: but I knew that my want of appetite would be remarked, and forced myself to make some show of eating.

When I went up to bed I had an almost equally difficult task, for Beta had been sadly upset by my outbreak of the afternoon, and I had to find reasonable excuses for my conduct. But it was difficult to quiet her uneasiness. She suspected, I could see, that some serious trouble hung over me, though she could not make up her mind as to whether it was real or imaginary; and I had considerable difficulty in convincing her that I had merely had a hysterical attack which was now quite past and over. I did succeed at the last; that she should think me odd and incomprehensible I could not help; it was better that she should think anything than suspect the

truth; and when we parted for the night, I had the comfort of knowing that she was still far from the knowledge of it.

I did not sleep that night; not till the tardy coming of the dawn did my tired brain find relief in a short spell of slumber; throughout the dark hours I lay and faced my position, considering how I best could meet it. Truly it was difficult to decide; uncertainty hung about me, and unproved suspicions were inadequate to guide my conduct. That danger threatened me, there could be no doubt, but of what kind and whence it originated, I could not determine. And I was as defenceless as I was ignorant. I had nobody whom I could consult; the Sullivans were far away in Ireland; and indeed had they been near at hand, they could not have helped me; for I should not be allowed, I felt sure, to leave South Kensington again till Jesse had accomplished his purpose. To escape—that was the only way, but I had not enough money to pay even the third class fare to Ireland, and I dared not ask Mrs. Pimpernel for a half-penny beyond the pocket money, five shillings a week, to which she still restricted me. I thought of my old nurse; but I could not live on her bounty; and besides they would be sure to find me if I went to her. She was the first person to whom they would be likely to go, and they would represent me as mad and bring me back, and I should be more helpless than ever. Suddenly there flashed across me the face of Beta's lover. I could trust those blue eyes and the kindness of the heart behind them; but the little hope that was born in me had to be strangled at the birth; for how could I tell him what I suspected of the mother and brother of the girl he loved? Would his love, if he believed the tale, outlive it?

At any rate I could not risk the shattering of Beta's happiness; if suffering were to come to her, it should not be through conscious act of mine; and indeed I felt that if by falling in with Jesse's designs I could save her love from disaster, I would give him all he wished, if only I knew what it was. But everything was dark; as the night about me, so was the way before my feet, and I knew not how to guide my steps. So I lay miserable, lonely and afraid, till with the dawn, the very intensity of my sufferings brought relief, and, utterly exhausted, I sank for a while into the blessed unconsciousness of sleep.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FIGURE BY THE BED.

NOT joy, but still some measure of courage and composure came with the morning, and, necessity holding firm hands upon my nerves, I braced myself to meet, and if possible to parry, the dangers in my way. Seeing my face in the glass, I felt that its pallor would serve me ill in hiding my knowledge and alarm and that somehow its aspect must be changed. I had no rouge, but I remembered a piece of crimson ribbon from which the dye had come off one day when I had wetted it by mistake, and now by its aid, I was able to give my cheeks a colour which hid the traces of my sleepless night. To pretend that I suspected nothing—that, I was sure, was my safest policy, and I was relieved to find that my first attempt at concealment was successful; for Jesse, strolling in late to breakfast, remarked that little Hester was looking wonderfully well this morning, quite like her old self.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“I could hardly wake myself up this morning when Emily called me,” I answered, truthfully enough, sleep when once it had claimed me, having been loth to let me go again.

“You looked very washed out last night,” Mrs. Pimpernel remarked.

"I was very tired," I said; and with that the conversation on my personal appearance came to an end.

Two days went by in the usual humdrum way, and, in spite of my convictions, the ordinary routine, the commonplace, everyday aspect of things had its effect upon me, and I began to wonder if by any chance I had been mistaken, if the conversation I had overheard referred indeed to me, and if my imagination had not painted a picture blacker than the truth. Yet I doubted: the evidence of my senses could not easily be reasoned away; I was not mad, I knew; and Jesse's face kept alive the dread which had dawned in me when I first beheld it. Two days: not a very long time you will say; but long enough for fear and anxiety to prey upon the strength of one as weak and friendless as I, making it difficult to hide what I suffered. By the evening of the second day I felt so far from well that I begged to be allowed to go to bed immediately after dinner. My request was granted, and I went upstairs alone, thankful to escape the hour and a half in the drawing-room and the nightly game of draughts with Jesse. But Jesse followed me out of the room.

"You're not well, little Hester," he said.

"No," I replied, "so I've just told you."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I haven't diagnosed my symptoms."

He bit his lip. "Shall I do it for you?" he asked.

"Thank you, but I won't give you the trouble."

He paid no heed to my words.

"You're suffering from brain excitement," he said slowly. "You should take a soothing draught to calm yourself before going to bed."

"Thank you, but I'm not at all excited, only very

tired and a little faint. Please don't keep me standing here."

He moved to one side and let me pass, and without further words I went on upstairs.

I had been in my room half an hour or so when I heard a knock at the door. The sound made me jump, for my nerves were strung to a dangerously high pitch; but the knock was so loud and so ordinary that I was not really alarmed; it was Emily bringing me my hot water, I supposed, and with hardly a pause, I called out: "Come in." To my astonishment it was my godmother who entered. She held a glass in her hand and advanced towards me with an air of authority.

"I have brought you some medicine," she said, "something that will soothe your nerves and do you good."

"I don't think I need medicine," I answered.

"You are hardly a judge," she returned. "You will do as I bid you, and if you are not better in the morning, you must see the doctor."

"Very well," I said, prudence coming to my aid. "I suppose it's not very nasty."

"Oh, no; you will hardly taste it if you drink it down quickly."

"Thank you," I said. "I suppose I had better take it just before getting into bed?"

"Yes. Good-night."

"Good-night."

In another moment I was alone, and as soon as I was quite sure that Mrs. Pimpernel was on her way downstairs, I emptied the contents of the glass she had left with me into my basin. Suspicion was rife within me and I would run no risk of letting go of my consciousness that night. I undressed and got

into bed, placing the empty medicine glass on the table by my bedside. I was glad I had done so, for when Beta came up to bed, her mother accompanied her. I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep, breathing regularly and rather loud. It was an effort to keep my eyelids closed and motionless while Mrs. Pimpernel held the candle aloft and inspected me; but I succeeded; and she soon went away, taking the medicine glass with her.

The room was dark, save for the faint gleams of moonlight which found their way through the thick curtains, and, when I was sure that Beta was safely settled for the night, I slipped out of bed, put on my dressing-gown and sat upright in the darkness. The lock of my door was still unmended; my only protection was a barricade such as I had used in Derbyshire; and when my eyes had got so used to the scarcely illumined darkness that I could be sure of moving about without stumbling, I crossed the room again and pushed the table by my bedside across the doorway. Then, once again, I sat down to wait. I hardly knew what I waited for: but the presentiment of evil was strong in me, and I felt that the night would not pass without unusual event. I had no inclination to sleep, yet I would not lie down for fear sleep should steal upon me, and with my bodily weakness—for I was not well, as I have said—held at bay by excitement and fear, I awaited in my arm-chair what night would bring. It brought, for what seemed a long, long time, nothing. Midnight struck: from the steeples around, the strokes of many clocks reached me with more or less distinctness through the silence: and then after years of strained waiting, during which I lived through scenes that memory recalled or imagination created, it was one

o'clock; and again, after another long waiting, at last it was two. My eyes had grown so used to the darkness now, that the faint moonlight which tempered it enabled me to distinguish the various objects in the room, and my ears were so sharpened by the silence that they caught the slightest sounds. From the mews at the back of the house, deep down below my window, I could hear the movements of a restless horse, chafing in its stall; and from the streets the fitful sounds of the night were borne to me ever and anon. I had waited so long, and my nerves were so strained with the waiting, that I was hardly startled, but almost I think, relieved, when at last I heard a door open on the floor below, and a stealthy footfall, and the warning creak upon the stair.

I did not move; I had no plan of action in my mind; only I would not be there in the bed, ready for—I had never formulated to myself for what. Would my safeguard hold, I wondered, the barricade at the door? I was anxious to know, because of future tactics: and I would know now, surely, for the footfall paused just outside. The door handle turned very gently—the sound of its turning would never have awaked me—and the door was pushed, slowly, softly—till it reached the barricade. There was a pause, a second attempt, and a third. No, the table was too heavy evidently, to yield; the door was closed again, and a faint sense of triumphant relief stirred within me. A yard or two the footfall moved away. Was that to be all then? No, it paused again, and I knew now how it would enter. I did not hear, I only felt, the passage of the feet across Beta's carpet; but I knew exactly when the door between the two rooms would open, and just in what stealthy, hesitating way the figure would grope its way to my

bedside. By that faint light from the moon I could see the dim form seek and find its way; I could see that it bent over my bed; and I could hear the smothered exclamation of dismay, fear, or it might be anger perhaps. It raised itself again, and then came the hasty striking of a match, and a candle was lighted; and I sat in the far corner of the room and looked at the figure by the bed. From that moment it was to me as though I were possessed by some spirit other than my own; fear left me, or remained so cunningly clad in the garb of courage that I knew it not for fear, and a great calm destroyed all hesitation and made it seem clear to me how to act. I stood up, and I remember thinking how warm and soft were the gray folds of my flannel dressing-gown as they fell around me; and I said:

“I am here.”

Mrs. Pimpernel, she who had already stood once by my bedside in the shadow of the night, turned to me with such a violent start, with a face so ashen gray, trembled so and shook, that for the moment I thought she would surely fall.

“What do you want?” I said.

Then she recovered herself. “Hester, what nonsense is this? Why are you not in bed?”

Instead of answering her questions, I repeated my own.

“What do you want? Why do you come stealing here in the night time, groping your way to my bedside, afraid of the light?”

“Get into bed,” she commanded, all the imperiousness of her nature flooding back to her aid.

“By-and-bye,” I answered, “but tell me first why you are here?”

“Why I am here? To see that all is well with you, to satisfy——”

Just then the door into the next room, the door through which she had come, opened wider, and Beta, with startled, sleepy eyes, stood in her white night-gown in the doorway, amazement in every line of her.

“Mother!” she exclaimed. “Hester!”

“Hester is far from well,” Mrs. Pimpernel said, speaking with rapid, thickened utterance, “and I came up—I felt uneasy about her—to see, to assure myself——”

Dear Beta! All the astonishment in her face changed at once to the tenderest solicitude, and her voice rang anxiously as she came towards me.

“Are you really ill, Hester?”

I thought of nothing just then, except to reassure her.

“No, my dear,” I said. “I am all right. I felt tired and faint this evening after dinner, but there is nothing the least serious the matter with me.”

“Then why——?” Beta turned towards her mother.

“It was quite unnecessary,” I answered, “that Mrs. Pimpernel should have troubled herself to come groping to my bedside in the dark.”

“I didn’t wish to wake her, Beta, if she were asleep.”

There was an eagerness in my guardian’s voice and manner, an anxiety to justify herself in the eyes of her child, which, in spite of the anger and the horror I felt, appealed to me as pitiful, and for Beta’s sake I spoke as I spoke next.

“It was very considerate of your mother,” I said, “but she has been unnecessarily anxious. And now, had we not all better go back to bed?”

Slowly Mrs. Pimpernel crossed the room, back to the door by which she had entered. My eyes were upon her, and just at the last she turned and met them and shrank before what they told her.

Beta and I were left alone, and I felt my courage departing with the need of it; it was with a great effort that I met her wondering, anxious gaze.

"Hester," she said, "I—I hardly understand."

I gave a little laugh that should have been a sob. "I don't wonder you are puzzled; and it does all seem very—very ridiculous." (If my breath would only come properly, instead of in those gasps!)

"But there must be something wrong."

"Nothing to matter," I said. "Go back to bed, Beta. And I—I am very tired."

"You are sure you are not ill?"

"Quite sure, Beta dear, quite sure."

She came close to me, and put her arms about me and kissed me. Oh, reader, how I longed to lay my head against her shoulder and tell her all my dread! She was so much taller than I, and I felt myself so helpless and so small. But I dared not; I knew that I was of sterner fibre than she, and I would not weight her with my burden. I led her back to her bed and saw her comfortably settled there and kissed her and left her content; and then I went back to my own room and looked my fear in the face.

CHAPTER XVII.

I FIND AN ADDRESS.

I HAD sat for some time, hardly thinking, feeling, rather than with my mind considering, the increased danger of my position, when my eyes which for some time had seen nothing of the outer world suddenly made me aware of a small shining object close to me on the floor. Mechanically I rose and picked it up, wondering with but half of my distraught mind, what it might be; but presently the unusual shape and workmanship of it aroused my full attention, and awakened my curiosity. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before; a golden hieroglyphic; in size about the length of a watchkey. There was something familiar about it too; the curves at the base recalled a pattern that I somehow knew, and my weary brain sought to fix the recollection. Whence did it come? Certainly it was not mine; or Beta's; for I knew every trinket she possessed. Then there was but one explanation—my guardian must have dropped it. I had never seen her with it, to be sure, but—— As I mused, my hand made its way to the locket at my throat and toyed with it, according to a habit that I had; and all at once, clear and sure as certainty, the conviction flashed upon me that the piece of twisted gold was a key. Quickly I made my way to the mirror and turned the back of the locket to the light. Yes, there was the pattern which had

made the outline of my new-found treasure familiar; the waving base of the golden key would fit into the curving incision on the back of the locket. I tried it; my trembling hands, the flickering light, and the fact that I could not see what I was doing without the aid of the looking-glass delayed success: yet I was sure that I had but to persevere; and at last perseverance attained its end: the key fitted in. It would not turn, but pressure caused the loosening of some spring which made the locket to fly open and at the same time released the padlock-like bar which held the two ends of the chain together. They fell to the ground, locket, chain and key, and as I stooped to raise them, I experienced for the first time within my memory, the sensation—and a curious one it seemed—of feeling my throat quite unconfined and free. I examined the locket, carefully and with eager interest. Was it in any way connected, I wondered, with those midnight visits to my bedside? Was that what Jesse and his mother wanted? The dropping of the key in my room inclined me to think so; and I remembered Jesse's efforts to persuade me to take off the chain, which had so annoyed me in Derbyshire. But what the value of such a trinket could be I was unable to imagine; intrinsically it could be worth but very little; and I could not guess what was to be gained by acquiring it. Bringing it close to the light, I perceived that within were engraven words. I hastened to read them. On one side was written *Susan Grant*; that was my mother's maiden name, I knew: on the other was *James Brabrook*, a name I did not remember ever to have heard; and below the last, in smaller characters, crowded together into the small space which remained, as though the addition had been an

afterthought, was an address. I made it out with some difficulty owing to the minuteness of the writing; but the letters, though small were perfectly clear, and after a while I was able to decipher them: *Granbigh Hold, Cloverdale, Devon*, the words ran. What was the meaning of it? and who was James Brabrook? The name, facing my mother's name, suggested to my girlish imagination a romance which had never reached fulfilment. I knew my mother had not been very young when she married; and I wondered if this man, whose name and address she had taken such a strange method of preserving for me, was the lover of her girlhood, the friend to whom, when she felt death coming near her—Before the thought had time to complete itself, my resolution was taken. To James Brabrook would I go; he would help, advise, protect me; at some time, for some purpose, my mother must have intended me to seek him out and know him; and now, in the time of my need, I would follow up the clue which the locket gave me. From that moment I never wavered; the only thing to be considered was how to get to Devonshire. It was a long journey, and I had but eight shillings and ninepence in my purse, and no means, that I could see, of procuring any more. I could not borrow from Beta, for I did not want her to be involved in any way whatsoever in what I was about to do; and besides, her purse would probably be empty, as, though she had a dress allowance, she was generally in debt. And there was nobody else; except—yes, Mrs. Loveday, perhaps, would lend me the money; and then I remembered with a sinking heart that she was away from her little home in the north of London, and that days must elapse before a forwarded letter could achieve

what I wanted. The only other person I could turn to for help was Jenny, my old nurse, and her home was an hour's journey by train from London. But as I thought of her, I resolved what I would do: I had enough money to take me to the little Buckinghamshire village where she lived, and once there, she would give me, I knew, what I needed to pay my fare to Devonshire.

The dawn had not yet broken, but I began at once to make my preparations. First of all I fastened the locket and chain round my neck again, and put the key into my purse; then I dressed, very quietly, so as not to awaken Beta; and finally I packed into a hand bag the few things which I considered it absolutely necessary to take with me. When all was ready, it was still only five o'clock, too early to go to the station, even if I walked all the way. Still I must leave the house betimes, in order to run no risk of being seen by the servants; and at half past five, I stole into Beta's room, took a farewell look at her as she lay sleeping and passed on out of her door to the staircase. It was still dark, and I had to feel my way by the banisters, fearful of making any sound to arouse those two dreaded sleepers, by whose rooms I must pass. That creak of the stair—how loud it sounded! I paused, my heart in my mouth, terrified lest those doors just below should open; and my garments seemed to rustle in a way that was new to them. Hesitating, groping, hardly daring to breathe even, down I went and still down and down. The landing where dwelt all that I most in this world feared was passed now; I was close to the drawing-room; and now I neared the hall, and the front door was before me. I could draw back the lower bolts and turn the big key, and

free the latch ; but the bolt at the top—I wondered if I could ever reach it. Standing on one of the hall chairs, I still was not tall enough, and the only thing to be done was to fetch the library steps from the room behind the dining-room. Half dragging, half lifting, I managed to convey them somehow through the hall, and having drawn back the bolt, I painfully restored them to their place. Their presence in the hall would point to some unusual occurrence, I knew, whereas if I left no sign of my flight but the unbolted door, each of the servants might think the unbolting had been done by one of the others, and discovery would be delayed. Outside, the world looked dreamlike and unreal ; the lamps were still alight, and the day was as yet so feeble that I could have thought it night time. I hurried through the still empty streets, afraid at finding myself alone and unprotected while the morning seemed so far away : now and again I passed workers whose work took them early abroad, or homeless wanderers to whom the night had brought no shelter but itself. In the Park forlorn figures were lounging on the benches or straggling in from the streets for the only rest they might hope for ; and this early morning aspect of London being new to me, I did not understand who were the miserable people who looked askance at me as I passed. I reached Baker Street station soon after half past six o'clock ; there was a train to Chalfont at six forty-nine, and I strolled up and down the platform while the fear burdened moments passed. Tedious the time seemed and long till the train puffed up, and I was able to take my seat ; and then, when it began to seem to me as if we would never start, at last we started, and I drew my first free breath and felt that for a certain number of hours, at any rate, I was safe.

CHAPTER XVIII.

I FLEE AND AM PURSUED.

THE little station at Chalfont looked but half awake when I reached it, and I set out to walk to the farm where Jenny lived along deserted roads. Three miles I had to walk, but I did not mind the distance, for now I had a definite plan in my head, and to do something, anything, after the inactive suspense I had endured lately was bracing and, in a sense, restful. There was hoar frost on the grass at the side of the roads, on the hedges, and lying in great stretches of white on the fields, and I remember pleasing myself with the fancy that though the day had risen, the gossamer sheets had not yet been stripped from the quiet places of the earth where it had made its bed while night was abroad. I met hardly a soul all the way, but I knew the road, having twice before been allowed to pay Jenny a visit, and so had no need to ask for guidance. I was tired though, when I reached the narrow lane which led from the high road past Ash Farm, and the two walls of hedge which hemmed me in began to seem interminable before the tiled, many-pointed roof came into view. I found my way through the big gates leading into the farmyard, to the creeper-covered front of the house, heralded by the barking of many dogs and by the hissing of an unfriendly

flock of geese. It was eight o'clock now; the life of the farm was in full swing, and the household was about to begin breakfast. When Jenny first came to the door, she hardly knew me, for it was some years since we had met; then:

"Miss Hester!" she exclaimed, divided between joy and alarm at my unexpected appearance, "what-ever brings you at this hour of the morning?"

"Oh, Jenny," I said, and could say no more. I had felt quite brave and strong throughout my walk, and had thought exactly how I would tell my tale; and now when I had reached shelter and sympathy, all my courage oozed away and my self-confidence, and I felt as if my heart had turned into a well of tears which I longed to shed. Jenny knew my composition of old, how as a child suffering or excitement had been apt to upset the balance of my nerves, and without another word she took me by the hand and led me into the best sitting-room, the room she let to lodgers, and laid me on the sofa, while she proceeded at once to light a fire. That low-roofed room!—shall I ever forget it, and the rest and the calm of it? Green panelled the walls were, soothing and pleasant to the eye and mind, and the ceiling ran not quite level above them; one diamond-paned window, three times the breadth of its height, looked on to the farmyard, seen through a glow of red from the scarlet geraniums on the sill; the other, made in the fashion of a door, opened on to a plot of green, divided by a wooden paling with a gate in it from the grass meadow beyond. A cottage piano stood against the wall opposite the fireplace, and close to the fireplace was the broad old-fashioned sofa upon which I lay; and the large round table in the middle of the room, with its red cloth, the smaller one

in the corner adorned by books, mostly prizes won by the Elsdon children, the narrow mantelshelf, the faded carpet, the straight, honest chairs with their white crocheted antimacassars and bits of red ribbon—all these things, combined into a general impression of homeliness and friendly greeting, stamped themselves upon my brain and sank into my heart. Jenny took up at once her old nursery airs of authority, and I was commanded to lie still and quiet till I should have had some hot tea and bacon and home-made bread and butter. It was very sweet and soothing to me to lie thus and be bidden what to do; for all through my life, though the course of it has been such that I have been compelled to stand upright, to fight my own battles, to support rather than be supported, I have always had the desire to lean on a strength greater than my own; and for this half-hour, while Jenny fed and tyrannised over me as in my childhood's days, I was quietly happy in a rare sense of comforting dependence.

At last the time came to tell my story, and as I told it, I felt how strange, how unlikely, how incredible it must sound. Yet the dread that grew strong again in me as I spoke, must have spread from me to my hearer, carrying conviction with it, for Jenny, who at first was inclined to interrupt my narrative with, "Dear, dear, Miss Hester, now, are you sure it wasn't some of your fancies? You was always given to fancying, from the time you was a mite of a thing," grew anxious and alarmed as I went on, and when I ended, sat staring at me with fond, frightened eyes, unable at first to utter a word. Words came soon, though, and volubly, offers of aid and questions as to how she best could give it, and when I told her my plan, she was more than eager

to help me carry it out. I did not tell her the house or place to which I was going; if enquiries were made of her, it would be better, I thought, that she should be really ignorant of my whereabouts; she could not possibly reveal what she did not know; and she herself was quite willing to take my view, only begging me to let her know of my safety.

I left Ash Farm with a clear vision of Jenny's kind and anxious face, and a general impression of various pinafores and knickerbockered little Elsdons with fingers stuck shyly between rosy lips, and dark staring eyes full of curiosity. Jenny's husband drove me to the station in his gig; a big, dark bearded man, with a chivalrous simple heart and a desire to befriend me, obvious, though unexpressed. I felt less lonely, starting off in my third class carriage, with that burly form watching me from the platform; and with enough money in my pocket to carry me to Devonshire and with Jenny's approval of my purpose strengthening my power of fulfilling it, my courage and self-confidence grew firm again, and I even began to consider with a certain amount of curiosity, what and whom I should find at Granbigh Hold.

The train drew nearer and nearer to London; we passed Hampstead without stopping and were now in darkness, rumbling underground, down from the high ground to the lower level of Baker Street. We slackened speed; we were almost there; and now we were alongside the platform, where a number of passengers were waiting to get into the train which in ten minutes would start again on the down journey. A man in the compartment with me had his hand on the door handle, ready to leap out at the first possible moment, and I gripped my bag tight, pre-

pared to follow him when the train should come to a standstill: then with a start I drew back; I dared not alight and I felt suddenly sick and faint; for, within a few feet of me, waiting on the platform, stood Jesse Pimpernel. The third class carriages were in the front of the train and the first at the very back: Jesse would travel first in his pursuit of me, I knew, knowing his luxurious ways, and would go therefore to the end of the platform farthest away from the place where I would alight. But he might not get into the train till it was just upon time to start, and if—oh, if he should see me! I dared not risk it, and I dared not remain where I was, for fear of being questioned by the officials or of being carried forth again in the company of my enemy. I looked out of the window on the further side of the carriage; there was a narrow platform there dividing the two lines of rails, and at once I attempted to open the door which gave on to it. The door was very stiff; at first I thought it was locked, and the wild disappointment of that moment I shall never forget: but it opened—as I forced myself to treat the handle more gently, it opened, and I jumped out, and without one backward glance made my terrified way out of the station. I had meant to go by the inner circle train to Paddington, but I could not run the risk of delay, I could not wander, seeking the right platform, about that underground labyrinth. I knew my way to the street, and to the street I hastened, and there, hurrying into the first cab I saw: “To Paddington station,” I called to the driver; and panting, trembling, wondering whether I had indeed escaped, I was driven quickly away.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE END OF A JOURNEY.

It was quite late at night when I reached Cloverdale, far too late to continue my way to Granbigh Hold, and I was obliged to seek shelter in the little inn in the sleep-locked High Street. The hostess eyed me curiously; she was surprised, no doubt, to see, at an hour when she expected none but commercial travellers, a customer like myself. My absence of luggage, too, had a suspicious look, I dare say; but when I offered to pay for my night's lodging in advance, her fears in regard to my honesty, at any rate, were set at rest, and she took me up to an ancient little room where the floor seemed bent on emulating the sloping angles of the roof. There was a bed in it, though, and a clean one, and I felt that I wanted just then, in the intense fatigue which almost overpowered me, nothing else. Sleep, which for so long now, had come to me only in uneasy snatches, folded me in gentle, dream-banishing arms to her very bosom that night. That night? nay, far on into the morning, for when at last I awoke, the daylight was broad and full, and looking at my watch I found it was nearly nine o'clock. Hastily I sprang from my bed and dressed, and before another hour was well over, I was on my way to Granbigh Hold. I had made no enquiries of my landlady, beyond ask-

ing my way ; I thought it better, for one thing, to say as little about myself or my movements as possible ; and then too, I was afraid of the answers my questions might bring me. For, reader, now that I was so near my journey's end, the natural timidity of my nature reasserted itself, and I was afraid of hearing anything about the place and the people I sought, which might further discourage and distress me. It was a long walk, along the highroad at first and then by what was hardly more than a track across a moorland plain, broken in upon by unhedged stretches of fields. As I advanced further and further across the plain, I became conscious of a constant, booming sound, full but not loud, powerful and yet dim. I wondered what it could be, not dreaming at that time that I was drawing near to the sea, and that the sound I heard came from the great Atlantic, from that same imperious ocean whose waves beat and broke unceasingly on the Irish coast I knew. In the distance I saw gray walls uprising from the brown of the moor ; a building, no doubt, though I could not distinguish the form of it, and looking strangely desolate in its isolation. I drew bit by bit nearer, and then the mass of gray resolved itself into a house surrounded by high walls. Only the roof and the upper windows of the house could I see, for the surrounding walls were so lofty that they hid the greater part of it from view.

My heart beat high with a strange mixture of curiosity and hope and dread as I approached, for I knew that this must be Granbigh Hold. At last I was there, close under the walls, and I walked on beside the high gray shield of stone till I reached a postern gate, of wood, with a little grille in it. The grille, however, was covered from the inside and so

was useless to me as a peephole, and there was nothing for it but to try the latch of the gate. It yielded at once to pressure, and another instant showed me a fair smooth plot of grass, girdled with flagged formal paths, and beyond the paths, wide borders where late autumn flowers grew under the shelter of the walls. The house directly faced me; long and low, with wide, small-paned windows, and broken, gabled roof, and about it an atmosphere alike of peace and solitude. I made my way, fearful and hesitating, round by the flagged path to the door. It was opened presently by a matronly-looking woman with sleeves turned back, a cap and a large apron.

"Is your master at home?" I said.

She thought so, she answered, but she couldn't be sure; he might be out and about the farm. Did I want him particularly, or would the mistress, perhaps——

"Anybody," I said, and followed her into a wide, square hall and thence into a room, prim and refined, severe, but beautiful. I don't know quite how to describe the impression which that room made upon me; later on I understood what it was that went to the formation of it; but then, as I stood, timid, doubtful and weary, I was only conscious of distinct elements, not so much antagonistic as conflicting. The dark shining furniture, which, ignorant though I was of such things, I yet felt to be beautiful and rare, was arranged with stiff precision; books which I somehow knew to be on religious subjects, lay square and dogmatic by objects moulded or carved by an artist's hand; everywhere formality marched with grace.

The door opened and a woman entered; a woman medium of stature, slight of figure, with a pale,

delicately cut face, and gray smooth hair turned back from her forehead. Truth in its rigidity looked forth from her eyes, virtue uncompromising sat upon her brow. I knew her to be good, I felt her to be stern; I trusted and feared her. Our eyes exchanged a greeting; she asked what I wanted and I implored her aid; and then we spoke with our lips.

"James—Mr. James Brabrook," I faltered, the words stamped firmly on my brain coming first to my tongue.

"Sit down," she said, and then, quite calmly added: "My husband is dead."

"Dead?" There must have been strong emotion in my voice, for her quiet face looked startled.

"He died," she said, "nineteen years ago."

Her words overwhelmed me. Nineteen years ago! a year then after my mother's own death! And what could I do now? How could that inscription in the locket serve me, now that my protector—for it was thus I thought of him—was no longer in the world? The full friendliness and desolation of my position was borne in upon me, but words failed me to express or explain my emotion.

"Oh, I have come so far," I breathed, and it was all I could say. Mrs. Brabrook regarded me with a not unkindly air.

"Where have you come from? Who are you?" she asked.

Probably she had never heard of me, I reflected, and how was I to tell this stranger all the cause and reason of my coming? Would she believe or understand such a story as mine? The hopelessness of it all made me despair.

"Oh," I groaned, "you won't, I dare say, even know my name. I am Hester Wynne."

“You are Hester Wynne?”

The quickening of her utterance, the interest in her voice roused me to new, sudden hope.

“Do you know,” I asked eagerly, “do you know me? who I am?”

“I know—not much,” she answered, “but still something, and something important. I am glad you have come.”

At that moment a shadow crossed the window; Mrs. Brabrook glanced towards it, then went out into the hall and called.

“John! Come here!” She came back in a minute, a man, a young man, following her; and for the first time I looked on John Brabrook. How the picture remains with me! The tall figure, slight and strong, the noble face, the curving sensitive mouth and the eyes with the smile in them. Reader, from that first moment, I think, I loved him; or, at least, if it was not so, I know not when love began; since though, looking back through the years, I know that each day of our friendship made him dearer to me, I yet can think of no day from the very beginning when he was not dear.

“John,” said his mother, “this is Hester Wynne.”

He heard her words, of course, but I think he was giving less of his attention to what she said than to the weariness and suffering in my face. He was shy—I felt it at once, as I felt and knew so much about him intuitively—but the pity he had for me overcame the shyness, and he came up to me and held out his hand, saying:

“I am sure you are very tired.”

Simple words, that a stranger might say conventionally to a stranger; but what they really

meant was: "You are small and lonely; you touch the tenderest part of my heart; and I will take care of you"; and from that moment I knew what it was to have a protector.

"Hester Wynne!" he went on presently, when we were all seated, and Deborah, the woman who had opened the door to me, had brought some biscuits and a glass of milk for my refreshment: "it has been a name with me for long, and I have looked forward to the time when the name would become a person."

"But that time might never have come," I said, "if——" I stopped, for they had yet to learn what had brought me to the Hold.

"It must have come," he said, "next January."

"I shall be of age next January."

He smiled. "I thought that was probably it."

"You don't look twenty-one," Mrs. Brabrook remarked.

"Oh," I cried in dismay, "but I shall be twenty-three."

"You come of age two years later than is customary then?"

"Yes," I said, "and I wish I didn't. If only it had been at the proper time—two years ago!"

"Are you so anxious to come into your kingdom?" John asked.

"No; but then it would have been before Jesse came home."

"And who is Jessie?" There was a faint gleam of amusement in his eyes. "I don't know her, you see."

"It isn't *her*, it's *him*," I answered. "He's Jesse Pimpernel, Mrs. Pimpernel's son, and Mrs. Pimpernel is my guardian."

"Is her name Clarissa?" Mrs. Brabrook asked.

"Yes."

"Then I know," she said.

"It is because of Jesse," I went on, and involuntarily I lowered my voice, "that I am here. When I found the name in the locket, and the address, I thought that——" I broke off; the bewildered look on the faces of the mother and son told me that I must be coherent and tell my tale from the very beginning. "It will be best," I said, "for me to tell you the whole story, but I—it is all so strange—and I wonder if you will understand, if you will be able—if you will help—— But perhaps you will not even believe me." Involuntarily I began to tremble, and the agitation which could not but arise when I thought of all I had gone through, all I had escaped, all that might still befall me if I should fail to find help and protection, threatened to overthrow my self-control.

Mrs. Brabrook looked at me in her inflexible way. "You had better wait I think, till you are calmer, if you have a story to tell."

"Miss Wynne is very tired, I am sure," said her son. "She ought to lie down and have a good rest before she attempts to do or say anything."

"Yes. Would you like to stay here on the sofa, Miss Wynne, or would you rather go upstairs?"

"I would rather, I think," I said, "go—go upstairs."

My voice faltered as I spoke; I rose or tried to rise to my feet. A strange feeling was upon me, a dizziness, a sense of gathering mist and darkness; I had a vague idea that I must go at once and quickly, upstairs as Mrs. Brabrook said, to some quiet place where I could lie down and rest, before the darkness

quite overpowered me, before the reeling, tottering world quite fell and carried me with it. I have a dim impression of trying to rise, of strong arms cast about me, of being raised and borne in those arms through what seemed limitless space; and then I remember nothing more at all for a long time; so long, so long!

CHAPTER XX.

THE DREAD COMES BACK.

I HAVE often wondered whether, had the illness which held me for so long in its grasp, never taken place, it would have made a great difference in the events which followed. Should I have been saved from any of the further suffering and danger, if I had been able to tell at once what had brought me to Granbigh Hold? Perhaps; and yet I don't know; my tale sounded incredible, and might in any case have met with incredulity. Anyhow it is useless to wonder, for it was not so: it was long, as I said, before reason and memory came back to me, and for many weeks and weary wanderings of delirium were the only sort of consciousness I knew.

When I once more knew myself and the world about me, snow lay all around upon the moor and the hills, and the hard, still grip of frost held the earth in a trance. I remember quite well my awakening into this mid winter. Opening my eyes, I saw at first nothing but the glow of a fire which gleamed and crackled opposite to my bed. I did not at first even consider where I was, and some time must have passed, I fancy, before I realised that my surroundings were quite unknown to me. Curtains of pale flowered chintz draped the windows; old oak

furniture stood dark against the white panelled walls; I lay in a little oak bedstead; and close to my side was a table on which were medicine bottles, glasses, and a feeding cup. It was only gradually, however, that all these things came within my ken, that I awoke to the consciousness that the objects about me were unfamiliar, and that I began to wonder where I was. Then I tried to sit up and look about me; a futile effort, for I could not even raise my head from the pillow. What had happened to me? I was not in Ireland, I was certainly not in my own room in London. Whom could I be staying with? and why was I so tired and weak that I could not move? Thus far had I got in my reflections when I heard the door open and a footstep draw near my bed. The sounds awoke a train of recollection, and suddenly came the memory of my night-watch in the dark, of my guardian's midnight visit, of my escape, of my flight to—— Whither was I going? and how far—where was I now? The footsteps came cautiously round the foot of the bed and someone stood by my side. It was afternoon and the light was growing dim; I could not distinctly see the face, I did not recognise the outline of the figure. Then a voice spoke.

“You are awake, then? You have slept a long, long time. You will get well soon now.”

“Am I ill?” How thin and quivering my voice sounded!

“You have been—very ill.”

“Where am I?”

“Hush! not too many questions. Drink some of this.”

A cup was held to my lips and I drank obediently, something lukewarm and gelatinous.

"You are with friends," the cold calm voice went on. "Don't try to think of anything just now."

"With friends? but who—how—" Recollection struggling in my brain made the barrier of oblivion which held it back seem insupportable. "Oh, I must know," I said in that feeble little voice, "or my head will burst."

"You are at Granbigh Hold. My name is Brabrook—James Brabrook's wife. Now do you remember?"

Did I remember? I began to think; yes, I remembered—James Brabrook—the locket—my mother's friend. "Am I safe?" I asked with an eager suddenness which startled my informant.

"Quite safe," she answered soothingly, "quite safe. Now try to rest again."

But I could not rest just yet.

"It was the locket, wasn't it?" I said, "and the name inside—?"

"Yes, yes."

"And I came, yes, with money—Jenny—but he is dead."

"Yes, but it is all right, it will all be all right."

"You are quite sure I am safe."

"You are quite safe."

"Quite safe, quite, quite safe," I think I murmured—I know at least the words were in my mind; and then I suppose I fell asleep again.

That room became very familiar to me before I was able to leave it; I knew it in the early morning, in the midday brightness, in the evening twilight, and in the night time, when the little shaded light shone cheerily and steadily through the darkness. Gradually my strength came back to me; and not

too slowly either, for I had wonderful recuperative power, the doctor said. There came a day when I was lifted from the bed to the sofa, and when I tried to stand on legs that seemed to crumble away from under me; and then another day when I was fully dressed and carried down to the room where I had lost consciousness ten weeks before. John Brabrook carried me down in his arms, as he had carried me up. We were quite on familiar terms now, for through all the time that I called my sofa days, he had come every afternoon and sat and talked with me, and the sympathy which had sprung up between us at the first, had developed into a friendship which was more important and precious to me than at that time I understood. We had talked of many things; of books, of foreign countries, of places and people, of the kinds of scenery that pleased us best, of tastes and likes and dislikes; of everything almost in the world, I think, as the world was known to me then, except the reason of my coming to Granbigh Hold. Several times I began upon the subject, and always, I never quite knew how, he led the conversation away from it; and once, when I directly said that I wished to talk about it, that there was much I wanted to ask and tell and know, he answered that we must wait till I was quite strong again, and that until he gave me leave, I was to keep all thoughts of what had happened before my illness and what was to follow after it, out of my mind. Reader, I obeyed him; just because, I think, it was sweet to me to obey: much as I liked to have my will,—and, timid as my nature was in many respects, I know full well that I was fond of my own way—it never came hardly to me to submit to John Brabrook. I used sometimes to wonder why it was in those days, not know-

ing that it was just the woman's nature desirous of yielding to the mastership of the man she loved.

I was placed on the sofa in the quaint room which had impressed me so on the day of my arrival. I understood now the contrasts in it and the contradictions; the conflicting tendencies of John Brabrook and his mother it was which produced the impression it made upon me. For the son was an artist by nature, whereas the mother was a Puritan from her heart's core to her finger tips; not skin-deep were her ideas, the results of education and upbringing, but rooted in the very essence of her being; as John was essentially a lover of beauty, of gladness, of the glory and the sweetness of life. Yet the bond between them was unusually—and curiously, as I thought—strong. Her firm, passionless nature held his passionate, eager one by very force of contrast; to her authority, exercised inflexibly from his childhood up, he yielded an obedience which was chivalrous, rather than submissive; to her undemonstrative affection he responded with an unfailing consideration for her prejudices and opinions. On her side, she came as near to adoring him, I think, as the coldness of her nature allowed and the strength of her religion permitted. She was proud of him, proud of the very things in him of which she instinctively disapproved; she deprecated and admired, she condemned and was tempted to worship. As I lay on the sofa those first few days after I came downstairs, I often thought of another mother and another son, of Mrs. Pimpernel and Jesse, and of the contrast between the two pairs. “And yet,” I thought, thinking of Mrs. Pimpernel, “she loves him—there can be no doubt of that. What a strange

thing, that love should so lower! But if it lowers, is it love, or just mere selfishness?"

"What do you think?" I said aloud, one day, "can a thing which lowers one ever be love?"

"Love," answered Mrs. Brabrook, "would cut out its very heart and cast it away rather than that the soul should perish."

Involuntarily and questioningly my eyes sought John's.

"I don't know," he said, "what love might or might not do."

"I was thinking," I said, and I drew in my breath sharply, for I shrank with an intense shrinking from speaking of my past experiences, "of Jesse Pimpernel; and—and I think I ought to tell you now about it all, and about my coming here."

I saw the mother and son exchange glances, but I could not know, how could I dream? what the glances meant; I only saw that Mrs. Brabrook's face took on a sterner look and that those tell-tale lips of her son's showed disquietude as he rose and left the room.

"Hester," Mrs. Brabrook began when we were alone, "you came of age last month."

"Yes," I answered, "while I was ill."

"You had brain fever," she went on; "you were wildly delirious; in your delirium you spoke constantly of your guardian and her son."

"I dare say," I said, "I dare say, for the terror of them possessed me."

"That illness had been coming on for some time; for some time back your brain must have been more or less distraught."

"I think I was half mad," I murmured, "with the terror and the horror of it all."

“A distraught brain takes up all sorts of fancies. It imagines what is not true; unreasonable fears and strange fancies possess it.”

I sat up on my couch; a cold, sick feeling crept over my heart.

“Yes, in delirium,” I said, “but now—now that I am well again——”

“For some time before your illness,” she went on, “your nerves were in a state which made it difficult to separate fact from fancy. You must not allow the recollections of that time to take possession of you again.”

I spoke in a sort of despair. “Aren’t you going to believe what I say?”

“I shall never doubt your truthfulness, Hester, for truth is in your eyes, but, from your guardian’s account——”

I broke in upon her. “My guardian’s account? My guardian! What do you—what can you mean?”

Mrs. Brabrook looked at me with her sternest look. “You must keep yourself calm if you wish me to talk to you.”

With all the force of my will I held my agitation in check.

“Go on,” I said. “You need not be afraid. But I must know what you mean.”

And then she told me the truth, the bitter, miserable truth; that a few days after my arrival, while I lay ill and unconscious, she had received a letter from Mrs. Pimpernel, saying that my mind had for some time been in a curiously unsettled state, that I had finally run away, that she and her son had thought it just possible I might have gone to Granbigh Hold, and that she begged Mrs. Brabrook to let her know if she had any news of me. The result

of that letter and Mrs. Brabrook's reply had been that Mrs. Pimpernel had come to Devonshire, had given her own plausible account of all that had happened, had stood by my bedside and watched me as I lay raving in delirium. The sense of horror, of capture, of hopelessness, which came over me as I listened to Mrs. Brabrook's words, was like a nightmare. I was calm indeed, but it was the kind of calm, I think, that a bird must feel when it knows that escape from the hawk is impossible. I was speechless for a time.

"So you are going to give me back to them again," I said at last. "When am I to go?"

She answered my question indirectly. "Now that you are of age, you are free to do as you like. Nobody can force you to do anything or live anywhere against your will."

I had of course known that this would be so, but till that moment I had not realised the truth and the real meaning of it. My spirits and my courage revived at the thought, but only to sink down again; for how can I, I thought, friendless, however free, stand out against the desires of Jesse Pimpernel, escape from the snares he has laid for me, prove, while there is yet safety to be gained by the proving, that my fears have a real foundation? I am alone; nobody will believe what I say; the odds are all against me. Thinking thus, and being still weak from recent illness, tears of despondency welled up into my eyes, and I feared that they would overflow. I did not want Mrs. Brabrook to see them, and I rose and went to my own room, to ponder alone over what it were best to do. At any rate there was still my side of the story to be told, and the telling of it, I resolved, should not be further delayed.

CHAPTER XXI.

I TELL MY STORY.

THAT evening I told my version of my tale to John Brabrook and his mother. At the beginning, the dread of incredulity sat upon my tongue and made my words come hesitatingly, but as memory recalled my experiences, the scenes through which I had passed became so vivid and real, that I forgot all save the horror and the pain of them, and told my story without thought of its effect upon my audience. When I had finished, I came back to my surroundings and sought the faces of my listeners to see whether they believed in the reality of my tale. John Brabrook came across to me in answer to the question in my eyes.

"You poor little child," he said, "how much you have suffered!"

Elizabeth Brabrook turned her still eyes upon me. "It is a strange tale," she said.

"Do you believe it?" I questioned.

"Yes and no," she answered me. "The facts, I am sure, or most of them, happened as you describe, but the meaning you put into them is false."

I turned from the mother to the son. "John, you believe it—the meaning as well as the facts?"

He hesitated, then sat down beside me and laid his hand on mine. At first his touch soothed me,

for I felt that whether he doubted or believed, he still would stand by me, take my story seriously, respect my fears. He was puzzled, I could see; the emotion which had possessed me during my narrative had affected strongly his impressionable nature: but the improbability of my alarm being justified, the brain fever which had followed the events which I supposed to have happened, the anxiety which Mrs. Pimpernel had displayed as to my welfare, led him to believe that my imagination had put a sinister interpretation upon much which to anybody in a healthy frame of mind would have appeared ordinary and harmless. I guessed his doubts, guessed that he laid to the charge of over-wrought nerves and a too vivid imagination a proportion at least of the terror to which I had fallen a prey, and bitterness rose in me as my heart sank.

"Do you believe me?" I repeated presently. I saw that my question distressed him, and while he hesitated I drew my hand from his. "No, I see that you don't," I went on. "I see that you think I was half mad or more than half mad, and that no importance is to be attached to anything I say. But if my imagination was affected then, it is affected still; if I was possessed by delusions before my illness, the delusions still remain. I cannot make you believe me, but you cannot destroy my convictions. You can refuse to have anything more to do with me of course."

Mrs. Brabrook took no notice of my words; she was knitting and she did not even look up; but John turned to me with reproach in every line of that mobile face of his.

"You are hard on me, Hester," he said. "You know I don't think you mad or anything like mad,

and you know too, that even if I did, I should not refuse, as you say, to have anything more to do with you."

"I don't want people to have anything to do with me if they don't believe me," I returned. "The best thing I can do is to go away at once."

"The best thing you can do," remarked Mrs. Brabrook, still without looking up, "is to give up a useless discussion, and to keep to facts we are all sure of. I should like to know for my part if the iron box had anything to do with your idea of coming here."

"The iron box?" I exclaimed. "What box?"

"You don't know about it?"

"I never heard of it. What is it? What does it mean?"

"I can tell you nothing," said Mrs. Brabrook, "as to its meaning. I did not even know of its existence till after my husband's death. Then I found it in his safe with directions that it was to be handed over to you on the twelfth of January last, and if not claimed by you within a month after that date it was to be sent to Mr. Crosbitt."

"Who is Mr. Crosbitt?" I asked.

"A solicitor, evidently," answered John, "from his address. Otherwise we know nothing about him."

"What can it all mean?" I said. "And could that be what Jesse——" I did not finish my sentence. I would keep my surmisings to myself, I resolved, I would not subject myself to further evidences of incredulity. Somehow I felt but little anger against Mrs. Brabrook; it was John who had so vexed me; John who had given me a far greater measure of sympathy than his mother had done;

John who held the door open for me, when I went to bed, and whose eyes had a hurt look as they met mine. Then my heart melted, and I remembered how patient he had been with me all through my convalescence, and how that very evening, when I had flown out at him, he had answered with a gentleness which I knew did not come too easily to his quick, proud nature.

"You are good," I whispered. "Forgive me!"

He did not answer, but a smile broke over his face, and I went to bed with the light of it in my heart.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE IRON BOX.

THE next morning I had a letter from Mrs. Sullivan. I had written her a full account of what had happened, and this letter—her answer to mine—overflowed with sympathy and kindness; but she suggested nevertheless, that fancy might have played a considerable part in my experiences. That was what everybody thought; and on thinking over the course of events, I could not but see that there were grounds for such an opinion. Was everybody right then, and I the victim of delusion? I would fain have thought so, but I knew only too well that, improbable as it might sound, my version of what had happened was the true one. I was standing by the fire, wondering how I could prove my case, when John came into the room.

“I think,” he said, “that it is quite time you should take possession of your iron box.”

“Oh, yes,” I answered, my cheeks flushing with curiosity and excitement. I had indeed been longing to see what the box contained, but had not liked to ask to see it.

John smiled at my eagerness. “Come along then.”

He led me upstairs, into a room looking seawards, though from the window you could not behold, but could only hear, the sea. A narrow

wooden bedstead faced the light; there was but little other furniture in the room, which had somehow, though it was in perfect order, the air of being unused.

"It was here," said John, "that my father died."

"Do you remember him?" I asked.

"I remember his death."

It seemed to me that he shuddered as he spoke.

"You must have been quite a child then."

"Seven years old." And then, somewhat abruptly: "Now for the box," he said. He crossed the room to a cupboard close by the bed, unlocked the door, and opening it, showed me an iron safe, set firmly in the wall. "Here my father kept all his papers, everything he considered valuable, and here my mother found your box." John selected another key from the bunch in his hand, fitted it into the lock of the safe, half turned it, twisted a handle, gave the key another turn, and pulled back the heavy metal door. Inside were shelves containing packages and bundles of papers, and on the lowest one stood an iron box, about a foot deep, a foot wide and nearly two feet long. There was a handle at either end, and from one of them, attached by a slender chain of steel, hung a key. John lifted the box from its place, the place where it had stood for at least nineteen years, and put it on the floor beside me. I read the inscription in ink, faded now, on dust covered paper, fastened to the box by seals at the four corners: *For Hester Wynne. To be kept and guarded for her till the 12th January, 18—. If not claimed by her within a month after date, to be delivered into the hands of Benjamin Crosbitt of the firm of Crosbitt, Crouch and Crosbitt, 33 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London.* I looked up at John.

"How strange! To be kept and guarded!"

"You are just in time," he answered. "Tomorrow is the twelfth of February." He loosened the steel chain and gave the key into my hand; then he got up from the floor—for we were both kneeling—and made as though he would leave the room. But I called to him.

"You're not going away?"

He hesitated. "Hadn't you better open and examine it alone?"

I liked the delicacy of his feeling, but I most decidedly did not want him to leave me.

"No, no," I said, "certainly not. You *must* come," I added imperiously.

He came back then and again kneeled down beside me, and I said that he was to turn the key, and I would open the box. I think it gave him a sort of amused pleasure, then and always, to yield to my caprices, and he did as I told him. We both held our breath as I lifted the lid, and we paused and looked at each other before I ventured to touch the contents of the box. It was full of cases, of leather or of velvet, and I guessed at once that they contained jewels; and on the very top lay a letter, addressed to James Brabrook, Esq., in a hand I did not know, and beneath it another for Benjamin Crosbitt.

I turned to John. "These," I said in a whisper, "are what Jesse wanted."

A look of eager interest flashed into his face, but he made no answer.

I drew out one of the cases and opened it; rubies flashed red before me: another, and diamonds sparkled like living light: a third, and pearls lay quiet in their purity.

"They must be worth——" I breathed.

"A fortune," John said. "I know something about stones."

"What does it mean?" I asked filled with wonder. "Why should your father leave to *me*——?"

"There are letters," he said.

"To be sure."

I took the letters from the floor where I had laid them down beside me. The one addressed to Mr. Crosbitt was securely fastened; the seal of the other was broken. I handed the open one to John.

"It is to your father. It is for you to read it."

He drew the letter from its covering, and glanced at the signature.

"It is—it must be, from your mother," he said. "We must read it together." So we sat down side by side upon the polished boards and read the letter of twenty years ago.

"DEAREST JAMES" (it ran,— "I may call you so once again, because I know I am going to die, and as I shall never see you again, it can't matter, and it is so many years since we met." (Throughout, the letter was somewhat rambling and incoherent. I remembered my mother's portrait, and thought it was just such a letter as a woman with her face, a woman with a tender heart, a sentimental fancy and not too strong a will or clear a power of reason, might have written.) "You know I have a little daughter. I should have liked you to see her, James, though she is not like me; I should like you to be her guardian, and I think you would be, though I treated you badly I know. But you have forgiven me, I am sure, and you married (before I did, James, after all) and I hear your wife is very good and I am

sure she would be kind to my little Hester, because she has a child of her own. But Clarissa wants to be Hester's guardian, and she arranged it with the lawyer, and she said it would be so much the best way, and perhaps after all, you would not care to have my little girl. *She* will never treat anybody badly, I am sure; she will take her own way and do as she chooses, and nobody will be able to persuade her against her heart. I am sure of it, baby as she is, and very glad, for Clarissa meant it all for the best, I know, but I did love you, James, I did love you. But I should like there to be some link between you and Hester, I should like you some day to see her and know her, and so I want you to take charge of my jewels, all the heirlooms in her father's family and mine, and all the presents poor Roger gave me, and keep them for her till she comes of age. Then she will come and claim them, and if not, you would have to give them to Mr. Crosbitt, my solicitor. Nobody knows you are to have the jewels. I did not tell Clarissa, but I am sure you will keep them if I ask you. And it might be a way of bringing our children together. How I should like, James, if my daughter and your son could be friends and more than friends. And she would not treat him badly as I treated you; only now you will forgive me, I know, and I dare say that by this time you do not care. Good-bye, good-bye.

“SUSAN WYNNE.”

When we came to the end of the letter, we let it, by mutual consent, as it seemed, flutter to the ground, and for a while neither of us spoke.

“That explains it then,” I said after a pause.

“Yes.”

"They had been lovers, I suppose."

"They must have been."

"I thought as much, somehow, when I read the names in the locket. Poor Father!" I added softly. I was wondering whether he had known or guessed that my mother's love had never been wholly his. John echoed my words:

"Poor Father!" he said.

"But he—he didn't go on caring. He married, you see, some years before she did."

"I wasn't thinking of his marriage," said John.

"Of what, then?" I ventured to ask.

"Of his death," he answered.

We looked through the rest of the jewels; some were set in strange old-fashioned ways; all were beautiful and costly.

"I can never wear them," I said.

"Why not?"

"They are far too grand."

John looked at me. "You could wear them well, I think."

It was still early in the morning when we went downstairs again, after restoring the box and its contents to their place in the safe, and I, at John's request, had taken formal possession of the key; and as the day was bright with sunshine, I thought I would take a little turn across the moor. So I started off, facing towards the sea. I had always wanted to get to the edge of the cliffs and look down upon those waves, whose booming ring against the rocks I could hear from Granbigh Hold, and now, I thought, I was strong enough to walk so far. Very cold the air was, but full of life and strength, and the buoyancy and the freshness of it made motion a joy. The sound of the waves grew stronger; I

paused to listen to it, and pausing found that I was tired. Close to me was a stone boulder, sheltered by a growth of furze, and I sat down to rest for a minute before going further. It was beautiful, the solitude and the peace and the far, far distance from London and its trouble and dread. Soon I should have to return there, have to see and speak with, perhaps, the people I so feared. But I should be protected now, and in any case, there was no need to think of anything fearful or troubling to-day. Yet I could not hold my thoughts back from London. I thought of Beta—dear Beta! how I longed to know what she was doing, how things were going with her! and how much I should like to see her again! And from Beta my thoughts went to my guardian, and from my guardian to her son; and thinking of him, the old sense of fear, of instinctive warning dread stole over me once more. “What a fool I am,” I said to myself, “to be afraid when I am so far away from him!” Then I began to wrestle with myself. “Get up and walk on towards the sea,” urged common sense, “and don’t think of him any more.” “Turn homewards,” counselled the dread; and while I wavered between the two, close behind me a voice spoke.

“Well, little Hester, so I have found you at last,” it said; and I knew that it was not for nothing the sense of dread had stolen over me, and that when I turned, my eyes would meet the eyes of Jesse Pimpernel.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE MOOR.

THAT meeting took place I know not after how long, but at last I turned my head—it may have been after two seconds or two minutes—and faced the look which I knew would be in Jesse's eyes a mixture of mockery and triumph. He came forward and sat down by my side.

“Are you pleased to see me?” he asked.

I rose to my feet. “No,” I answered, “I am not, and you know I am not.”

“Absence sometimes makes the heart grow fonder, you know.”

“Why have you come?”

“To see you, little Hester. I wanted very much to see you.”

I made no answer but moved on, back towards Granbigh Hold. He followed me and put his hand within my arm. I stopped short.

“Leave go,” I said.

He hesitated, then prudence or something in my face counselled him to obey. I walked on again, and he paced by my side.

“I suppose you think,” he said, “that I might have waited to see you till you come up to London next week?”

“I should have thought that would be time enough, certainly,” I answered.

"You wouldn't, if you knew how I have missed you."

The speech I thought required no answer, and I made none. Presently:

"You haven't asked me," he said, "how we managed to trace you, what made mother write to see if you were at Granbigh Hold."

I shrugged my shoulders. I was indeed very anxious to know, but I would not show him my curiosity.

"It was by inference," he went on, "by putting two and two together." Then as I did not speak: "I suppose you opened that locket?" he asked.

"Why should you suppose so?"

"Because otherwise you could not have known the Brabrooks' address."

"How did you know it contained the Brabrooks' address?"

"Inference again, by calculating that two and two make four."

I puzzled over his answer in silence and he waited a minute before speaking again.

"It was very absurd, your running away," he said then. "You caused a great deal of trouble, anxiety and talk, and all for a ridiculous bugbear you had conjured up out of the Lord knows what."

"It is easy enough to talk of bugbears," I rejoined, "but I don't know that even *you* can prove everything that happened to be mere imagination."

"Pooh!" he ejaculated contemptuously; "you mix up fact and fancy, little Hester, in a most distressing way."

"Separate them," I said.

"Very well; I will. You began then by fancying that you saw and heard ghosts; fancying, I say,

though I'm not at all sure that you haven't the faculty of perceiving the supernatural; I always said you had seeing eyes, you know. Then, for some reason or other—on account of my chaff, I suppose—you took it into your head that I wanted to get possession of that ridiculous locket of yours—a thing of absolutely no value. I tried at first to get you to take it off because I thought the whole thing absurd, and then when I saw that the idea of continuing to wear it was becoming a regular *idée fixe* with you, a sort of monomania, a thing which possessed you night and day——”

I broke in upon him. “How can you?” I exclaimed, “how can you possibly dare to assert anything of the kind? You know perfectly well that I rarely thought about the locket at all, until I saw that you wanted to get possession of it.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Still the idea of robbery with violence!” he sneered.

“Go on,” I said, “with your explanation.”

“Well, when I saw that the thing was becoming a monomania with you, I consulted with my mother——”

“One Sunday afternoon,” I could not forbear putting in.

“I beg your pardon,” he said abruptly; evidently he had not quite caught my words. Prudence came to my aid and I did not repeat them.

“Go on,” was all I said. “You consulted with your mother, you were saying.”

“As to what it was best to do. The locket was to come off in any case when you came of age; it seemed better to forestall that part of your mother's wishes, and to remove it before your monomania should become utterly unconquerable. You refused

to take it off willingly; the only way was to remove it with as little excitement and distress to yourself as possible."

"Is that your story?" said I.

"That is the truth. You began with fancies, you jumbled up your fancies with facts, you finally ran away because my mother came to your bedside, after you had gone to bed in a state of delirious excitement, to see if all was well with you."

"You do not deny then, that you tried and that she tried, to get possession of the locket."

"I deny no facts."

"Not even that you followed me to Derbyshire and escaped through the window like a common thief?"

"That was not I," he said coolly.

"Mrs. Loveday saw you too."

"Saw somebody—whom she did not in the least recognise."

We walked on a few paces in silence. I was thinking so deeply that the sound of his voice made me jump.

"Hester," he said in quite a different tone from that he had used hitherto, "Hester, all this is not what I came to say to you. It is something quite different I meant and want to say."

He stopped and I stopped too, hardly knowing why, and again we faced one another. I remember so well the feel of those moments. A little knoll close by, blocked out the view of Granbigh Hold in the distance; all around, the moor, snow covered, stretched away; and still from the cliffs was borne the booming of the sea. A lonely scene it was, wintry and desolate, for thick soft clouds blown inland from the ocean by a westerly wind had hidden the

face of the sun and made the outlook bleak. I felt the chill of the day sink into my spirit as I faced Jesse Pimpernel; and I wondered what it could be that he had come to tell me.

"I have something to say to you," Jesse went on, "different from anything I have said to you yet. I have appeared to mock at your fears, to have no sympathy with you, no understanding of your trouble. Believe me, Hester, it is not so. I have acted and spoken as I have done, thinking to laugh or persuade you out of your fears. But all the time my heart has bled for you. If you would have trusted me, confided in me, it might all have been so different."

He paused, but I uttered no word. My eyes were on his, and I had a sort of presentiment of what he was about to say.

"It might have been so different; and now it shall be; for you need fear nothing, be distressed at nothing, if you will only give me hope. Hester, all this time I have tried to do what I thought best for you, for all the while you have been dear and more than dear to me. Has it never occurred to you, have you not felt and known that I loved you?"

In spite of my presentiment, his words for the moment took my breath away, and I think I gasped—I certainly did not and could not speak—as I looked at him.

"Yes, it's true," he said, "and I have come all this way to ask you to be my wife."

"Love me!" then I said. "Why you know quite well that you hate me."

He shook his head. "How blind you are!"

"I don't know what your motives are," I went on.

"I suppose you have motives, though I cannot conceive what they can be."

"It is the same old motive," he said, "that from the beginning of the world has made a man ask a woman to be his wife."

Still I stood and looked at him; it gave me a sort of horror that he should pretend to care for me; his words sounded hateful, and his face, his whole personality created in me a sense of loathing; yet I could not turn my eyes away.

"Your answer," he said presently.

"Do you really mean that you want an answer?"

"Yes, I want an answer."

"Then no," I said, "a hundred thousand times no."

"Is that final? Can you give me no hope of change?"

"No," I repeated, "no, and for ever no."

He gave that slow smile of his. "It were better for you, little Hester," he said in a sort of creeping voice, "if it had been yes."

We were not far, by this time, from the Hold, and presently I stopped and said: "Good-bye."

"No," he answered. "I am coming with you."

"But you don't know my friends," I protested.

"I know all about them, and you can introduce me. It would look very odd for me to be in the neighbourhood and not to call."

"I don't think so at all," I persisted.

In truth I was very unwilling, besides being anxious to be rid of his presence, that he should hold any communication with the Granbigh Hold household, and would have given much to prevent his coming with me. But I could not help myself; Jesse's plans were not easily thwarted, and I was obliged to fall in with them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE HISTORY OF THE JEWELS.

JESSE PIMPERNEL stayed to lunch. I could see that from the very first he and John did not like each other, and I was glad; for the one thing that I could not stand, I felt, was that they should be friends. An incident which occurred at lunch strengthened my impression of the covert antagonism between them. There was as a rule no wine at the meals at Granbigh Hold; neither John nor his mother ever touched it, the latter told me; and the daily glass of port which the doctor had ordered for me during my convalescence, was always brought to me, accompanied by a particular kind of sponge cake for which Deborah was famous, at eleven o'clock. But to-day both sherry and claret stood in old cut glass decanters on the table. Jesse was requested to help himself, and having filled his glass he passed the wine on towards his host. But John pushed the decanter away from him.

"No, thank you," he said.

"Don't you take wine in the middle of the day?" asked Jesse.

"I never take it."

"Indeed! Principles or gout?"

"I am a teetotaller," John answered, and then immediately began to speak of something else.

I don't know how, but somehow I knew that this subject of wine-taking was in some way disagreeable or painful to him, and I did my best to second his efforts to get away from it; but Jesse, for one reason or another,—perhaps because, as I fancied, he guessed that John wished to avoid it—resumed it again and again. I saw that his persistency angered John, whose spirit, to be sure, was none of the meekest, and I saw too that Jesse was pleased to irritate him; and though, at the time, want of knowledge hid from me the full significance of what passed, I was conscious of a disturbed atmosphere and of a growing antipathy between host and guest. I was glad of the antipathy, as I have said, though I should have been less glad and more anxious had I been aware that on Jesse's side it was made strong by a sense of rivalry. But so it was, though I did not realise it till later on; with his usual quickness, Jesse had seen at once how things were between John and me; before we were ourselves positively conscious of our feelings towards each other, he had discerned their character; and the discovery, by showing him a further obstacle in the path he had marked out for himself, turned the negative antagonism which could not fail to exist between his own nature and John's into active enmity.

After luncheon he set himself to talk to Mrs. Brabrook, recounting to her what he called the history of the jewels. It was a curious story and confirmed, curiously, I thought, my own ideas and suspicions. Little Hester's mother, he said, with a meaning glance at me, had evidently been somewhat eccentric, and had chosen an eccentric manner of safeguarding her jewels, till her daughter should be of an age to wear them. Not that there was any-

thing strange in her confiding them to the care of her old friend, Mr. Brabrook, but that nobody else should be allowed to know who had the keeping of them, seemed decidedly peculiar. "She left a letter for my mother," Jesse went on, "telling her that the name and address of the person who had charge of the jewels was contained in the locket which Hester wore at her throat, but that the locket, the key of which she gave into my mother's care, was not to be opened till Hester came of age. The reason for so much mystery is difficult to imagine," he ended up.

I thought of the conversation I had overheard on that Sunday afternoon, and of the letter which Jesse had then begun to read aloud.

"She was afraid that your mother would disapprove of her leaving the jewels with Mr. Brabrook," I said.

"What makes you think so?" he asked quickly.

Now I did not want Jesse to know that I had assisted at the interview between him and his mother; instinct warned me that it were better to hide from him what I had overheard; and I hesitated, at a loss how to reply.

John came to my rescue. "The letter which was found with the jewels rather gave that impression," he said.

"Yes," I agreed, and Jesse, after another sharp glance, went on with his story.

"Well," he said, "in spite of all the caution, my mother knew of course that there were but one or two people in whose care Mrs. Wynne would have left the jewels, and when she discovered that during her visit to Hester's bedside on the night when the delirium first declared itself——"

"I was not delirious," I broke in.

"Well, well," he said in a soothing sort of way which irritated me profoundly, "on the night when we first thought you seriously ill, the night before you ran away. When she discovered, as I said, that she must have dropped the key of the locket,—she always wore it on a chain inside her dress—it occurred to me that our little runaway had found it, had opened the locket, and had rushed off to try and find the person whose name it contained. It was just the sort of thing that a person in the first stage of brain fever might be expected to do, and it only remained then to write to the one or two people who could possibly have been selected to take charge of Mrs. Wynne's jewels. So you see," he ended, turning to me with the smile I hated, "it was not so wonderful after all, that we were able to trace you."

"Not wonderful at all," I agreed.

"Are the jewels very beautiful?" he asked.

"I don't understand jewellery," I answered casually. "They are old-fashioned, a good many of them."

"I should like to have seen them," he said.

I said nothing; I did not want to show him the jewels; and John said nothing. But his mother, after a somewhat awkward pause, said in a voice which meant rebuke:

"Hester will be glad to show them to you."

Her speech left me no alternative; I could be rude to Jesse, but I could not be rude to Mrs. Bra-brook; and there was nothing for it but to show him what I particularly did not want him to see. I remember standing in that upper room watching him as he opened case after case (how I hated to see

his hands amongst them!), his face inscrutable, only his quick movements showing to me, who had learned to observe him accurately, the eagerness with which he studied the stones.

As he went downstairs again, I managed to linger behind a minute with John.

"How do you like him?" I whispered.

John shook his head.

"I'm so glad," I said. "I knew you couldn't."

I had no further opportunity then of speaking to him, for he had offered to drive Jesse back to Cloverdale in time to catch the afternoon train, and the gig was even now waiting at the door.

CHAPTER XXV.

I PLAY THE SPY.

MRS. BRABROOK had been giving me a lecture on the evil of judging others and allowing oneself to be influenced by suspicions.

"But you can't wait for certainties," I had protested.

"When it comes to the kind of fear that you have allowed to take possession of you," she answered, "it would be wrong to act upon anything but certainty."

"You would wait to be murdered then, before you decided that a person wanted to kill you."

"You are foolish, Hester, in the way you talk, exaggerated and melodramatic. Extraordinary things of the kind you imagine don't happen in ordinary lives."

"But how do you know that your life is always going to be ordinary?" I asked. "Things *do* happen in the world, and why not to oneself as well as to another?"

"When God sends trials, time enough to meet them," she replied.

"Could you meet things," I asked, "terrible things, calmly, thinking God had sent them?"

"I have met," she said, "some terrible things, and God gave me strength and calm."

"It seems to me more likely," I said, "that God only sends the good, and that we've got to fight and struggle with all our might against evil."

"Faith," she answered, "is our best and safest weapon."

After that we had sunk into silence, and I pondered over what she had said and all that had taken place that day. The most marvellous thing of all was Jesse's offer of marriage, and the more I thought of it, the more uneasy I felt, for in spite of all that Mrs. Brabrook had said, my suspicions were still alive, and I could not credit him with a pure motive. I was wondering whether I should tell John about it (somehow I never thought of telling his mother) when Mrs. Brabrook spoke again.

"John will have a cold drive home," she said.

"Yes."

I was sitting by the wide old-fashioned fireplace and was supposed to be working; but I had let my work fall into my lap, and I gazed out of the window as I listened for signs of John's coming. The window showed me a patch of the garden where blades of green began to appear through the melting snow, a portion of the old high wall, and above it a brownish desolate sky, which went well with the foreboding in my heart. For, reader, foreboding was growing within me, and my fears were as much for John as for myself; something told me that danger or distress of some kind was about him, and it was as if a great weight had been lifted from me when I heard at last the sound of wheels.

I rose to my feet and went quickly towards the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Mrs. Brabrook.

"I think I hear John coming," I answered. "I was going to the yard to see."

"You are not strong enough yet to go rushing out into the cold."

Something in her tone made me feel that she thought me over bold in my anxiety over her son's return, and I sank back into my seat, unable to reply and feeling hot all over.

"Don't look like a beaten dog, child," said Mrs. Brabrook in a voice which I had learned to know was not meant to be unkindly.

"I was afraid something had happened," I faltered, "and now I do not hear the wheels any more."

"You must fight against unreasonable fears," said Mrs. Brabrook. "But stay you by the fire. I will go and see if he is coming."

Her own face, I thought, as she rose and left the room, was not quite free from anxiety, but the dusk was gathering, and I could not see her plainly. By-and-bye I heard footsteps and voices approaching. John had returned safely then. I had been longing for his return, but somehow now, when I was sure of it, the feeling which that speech of his mother had created in me a little while since gave me a sudden shrinking from meeting him. I thought of leaving the room, but I was too late, and without perceiving the childishness of my behaviour, I shrank back behind the tall old settle near the fireplace, and sitting down on the floor was hidden from view.

"Where's Hester?" John said as he came in.

"I left her here," his mother answered. "She must have gone upstairs."

Now no sooner had I hidden myself than I reflected how foolish my conduct would appear, and at John's words I got up and advanced round the

curved back of the settle, meaning to show myself. But his mother's reply proved that I was still unseen, and I then realised that I was in the deep shadow which hung between the settle and the wall. I should at once have said: "I am here," but I hesitated before saying it, and in that moment of hesitation my chance was lost for I was afraid afterwards to show myself; and thus, once again, I was present at an interview between a mother and a son without my presence being suspected.

The waning day still partly lighted the room, and the glow from the fire fell upon John's face and showed me that he was very pale. His mother stood close beside him and looked up into his eyes.

"Well?" she said.

"Well?" he answered.

"You've been a long time gone, John."

"We were half an hour too soon."

"And you waited?"

"Yes, I had to wait—at the inn."

She looked up at him without speaking, but I saw the question in her face.

He smiled down at her. "It's all right."

There was a pause. Mrs. Brabrook went back to her chair, a tall and stiff one it was, and John stood on the same spot where he had halted on first coming in, his eyes upon the fire. What did he see there, to give them so sad a look?

"Did you mind much?" Mrs. Brabrook asked.

"It would be cowardly and absurd to mind."

"Was it hard?—though God's strength, I know, was with you."

"It was not so very hard, but——" He broke off.

As I stood and watched him I saw his chest heave,

I saw his curved lips quiver, I saw the sadness deepen in his eyes, and I longed—how I longed, to come forth and comfort him, though I knew not, indeed, wherein his sorrow lay, or whence it sprang. Then, suddenly, he turned, and bowed himself, and, like a little child, knelt at his mother's knees.

“Mother, I have learned to-day that the evil is strong within me. Mother, it is hard to give up all that makes manhood most worth; love and——”

“John, John!” The voice was stern and full of rebuke; but I could see Elizabeth Brabrook's face, and in it was a tenderness such as I had not dreamed could waken there. “Have you no trust, no faith? Don't you know that He who sends the temptation will also make a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it?”

“It may be——”

Again the voice interrupted him. “May? Nay, it *will*.”

He rose to his feet again, and again his eyes were on the fire; it seemed to me that he read his future there.

“It may be that I shall go right through my life without once giving way, without even once making a beast or a devil of myself. But if I do—even if I could run the risk of bringing such suffering as you have suffered upon—upon any woman, how could I dare to hand down the heritage of struggle and of craving that was handed down to me?” He turned once more his face to his mother's face. “I have decided to-day that love and wife and children are not for me.”

“You are wrong.” Elizabeth Brabrook rose and came close to him. “God, if you keep His laws, will keep both you and your children from the evil.

To doubt it, to act as if you doubted, is to doubt that He is almighty; is sin, not righteousness. Your father sinned without repentance, and you are punished according to the law; for I, the Lord thy God, it is written, am a jealous God, and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children."

"Unto the third and fourth generation," John added.

"Aye," she went on, "of them that *hate* me, but show mercy unto thousands, the promise goes on, of them that love me and keep my commandments. Have I not tried to keep those commandments all my life? Have I not brought you up to keep them? and shall we fear that your children and my grandchildren will be doomed to go astray?"

He did not speak to her at once; then, very gently:

"Mother," he said, "you don't know what it feels like."

"I know," she answered, "what it is to trust in the Lord."

He sighed, a little wearily, as it seemed to me. "Well, there is no need to speak more of this just now! He turned away and went out of the room, and his mother stood where he had left her, and gazed as he had gazed, into the fire.

"God, preserve him, and give him faith!" she said, and clasped her hands together. And then I think her thoughts must have gone back a long, long way, for just before she left the room, she spoke again, and: "Poor little lad!" was what she said.

CHAPTER XXVI.

VISIONS.

I CREPT forth from my hiding-place covered with self-reproach, and bewilderment, filled with pity, overwhelmed by a sense of sickening pain. What terrible secret had I overheard? and how could I ever dare to look again into the faces of John and his mother, conscious that as an eavesdropper I had become possessed of a confidence which was not meant for my ears? But even my angry disgust at my own conduct was second to the pity and the pain which that conduct had brought me. I did not so much reasonably infer as intuitively gather what the trouble was which lay so heavily on John's spirit and his life; and guessing what it was, I knew that the promptings of inherited craving in a nature so noble, with instincts so refined, and tastes so fastidious as his, must be a source of bitterness and anguish, which a lower organisation would not be capable of and could not understand. And then through it all ran the indefinite pain, as from a heavy blow. I suffered selfishly, hardly knowing why, knowing only that those words, "I have decided to-day that love and wife and children are not for me," had shattered in some way the brightness and the hope of life. As one grows older one becomes familiar with the causes and effects of pain; one knows whence it comes, and

why, and recognises the sensations which it brings: but in youth it is strange; one fights against it; and bewilderment takes part in the struggle against accepting it for what it is. So I hardly knew and would not analyse the cause of my suffering; I felt only that I wanted to be alone, and the longing came, as always has been the way with me in trouble, to get outside, under the great arch of the sky, and feel the freedom of space and the mute sympathy of inanimate speechless things. I stole upstairs to my room and found my cloak, and pulling the hood of it over my head, went noiselessly out into the walled garden. The outside world was gray; the ebbing twilight seemed as though it had been caught by the mist and was held imprisoned after day had really gone; and by aid of its slender strength, my eyes were able to distinguish the outlines of familiar things, waiting like ghosts of their veritable selves till night should bring to them the darkness of the grave. Slowly I sauntered round the flagged paths, taking care to walk softly, so that my steps should make no sound which could be heard from within. There was a little old stone seat, set in the shelter of the wall and flanked by evergreens, and here, after a while, I sat down and cuddling myself up in my warm cloak, passed again through the scene which I had just witnessed. Presently, through the uncurtained window, I saw Barbara, one of the maids, enter the drawing-room with a lamp, and the room was plain to me as a stage picture. I could see it all, the dark, dignified furniture, the panelled walls, the wide, open fireplace, the settle in whose shadow I had lately stood, and the great jar of holly with berries showing bright against the sombre background.

As I sat there perplexed and miserable, my thoughts became gradually vaguer and more vague, and the dim outside world grew dimmer. My eyes were fixed upon the bright light in the room, and gradually all the room except the light faded away from me; and at last the light itself faded, and before my eyes was only a gray mist, blank and thick. Then all at once the mist parted, leaving a clear space, and in the space was a picture. Once or twice before, I had been aware of some consciousness above or below, at any rate outside the realm of, the ordinary consciousness of daily life, and I suppose that Jesse suspected in me something of the kind; but that evening in the garden at Granbigh Hold was the first occasion on which I ever had vision clear and complete. For the picture was very clear. I saw the room in which John and I had opened and examined the box of jewels. It was daylight, with the dusk beginning to gather, and across the floor lay a shaft of evening sunshine. In the narrow bed a man was lying, struggling, as it seemed, in the grasp of two others who bent over him, and close up by the pillow stood a woman with her back towards me. The sunlight reached right to the corner of the room, and in the golden haze of it a little boy was standing, shrinking in attitude, and with a frightened, bewildered face. I knew the face; childish and undeveloped though they were, I recognised the features; the child was John Brabrook. The picture remained only a moment or two, then faded, and the mist closed over it again. Several times since in the course of my life has a similar experience befallen me, and I have often thought that in such wise will be the coming of death. The world will grow dimmer and dimmer till it fades altogether

away, and in the mist that hides it, pictures may show themselves; of the past, it may be, or of loved ones far away; or the blankness may endure, till one wakes into consciousness again: only then the consciousness will not be of this world, but another, on the further side of that gray veil which hangs between the two.

I was drawn back into consciousness now by the sound of a voice calling. "Hester!" it called, "are you outside? Where are you? Hester! Hester!"

I felt at first all confused and strange. Where was I? and what had happened? Then I remembered; the waiting for John, and the look of the sky and the garden and the old stone wall as I had seen them through the window; his entrance and the scene which followed it; and then my coming out into the garden and falling asleep, as I supposed, on that cold seat. As my senses came back to me, I roused myself to answer the call.

"I am here," I said, "in the garden."

John came to me across the grass. It was all but dark now, and I could barely see him till he was quite close.

"Hester, what madness is this? Outside at such an hour and in such weather!"

"I came out just for a turn, and I sat down on this seat for a minute, and I saw Barbara bring the light into the drawing-room, and then—and then I think I must have gone to sleep."

"Oh, Hester, and when you are not really well yet! How long, pray, have you been asleep?"

"I don't know, I couldn't tell at all. I had a dream—a vision. So strange, it was!"

"Was it? Tell me."

"No," I said, "I will not tell you now."

"Well, you must come in now. How cold your hands are!"

"Let us walk up and down for a minute or two, till I get warm again."

We walked, side by side, and in silence; I, guilty in conscience, troubled and sorrowful, knowing not whether to confess what I had overheard, or whether it were better to hide from John my knowledge of a secret which surely he had not meant me to know; he, pacing beside me, bearing as I knew, a burden heavy to bear, and which weighed on him, I felt, very hardly then. But at last I spoke, and I stopped as I uttered the words, and said them in a whisper.

"John, did you hear anything?"

He answered by another question: "What do you mean?"

"There is somebody about," I said.

"Where?" he asked. "What do you mean, Hester?"

"I am sure of it, there is somebody."

"In the garden do you mean?"

"I don't know—or outside."

We were near the postern gate. In a couple of rapid strides John reached it and pulled aside the panel which covered the grille; and I, following close behind him, saw for an instant, through the opening, the gleam of a pair of eyes.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MAN AT THE GATE.

I AM quite sure that if John had been less prompt, and the owner of those eyes had escaped into the misty darkness which covered the moor, I might have supposed that it was Jesse Pimpernel who had been standing without the gate, so much did the thought of him weigh upon my mind at that time and colour my apprehensions; but the man upon whom John laid quick hands was entirely unknown to both of us. He was shabbily dressed; that much I was able to discern in the all but darkness, and his manner of speech showed him to be uneducated.

"What are you doing, skulking about at this hour?" John asked.

"I wasn't skulking. I was trying to open this gate," the man answered.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I want to see the master of the house."

"I am the master of the house," John answered.

"Well?"

"You've got a visitor stopping, I hear."

I was about to speak, when John laid his hand upon my arm.

"Perhaps I have," he said. "And then?"

"It's with the visitor my business is."

Curiosity was strong within me and I longed to ask what the business might be; but John did not give me time to speak.

"You must tell me what it is about," he said.

"That I can't do," replied the man doggedly; "there's only one person's got to know that, and I've got to see that person alone."

I pulled John's coat sleeve. "Oh, John, do let me!" I whispered. He took no notice of me.

"Then I'm afraid it's no use saying any more," he said. "No visitor of mine sees strange people who cannot say what they want at this hour of the night. You'd better think it over and come back in the morning if you've really got anything to say."

The man turned away without speaking.

"You go right away mind," John said; then, to me: "Go in, Hester. I'll be back presently. I must see that he really goes."

"Oh, let me stay," I pleaded. "I'm afraid."

I meant that I was afraid for him, though to be sure I was not much protection, but he thought that I was frightened to go back to the house alone, and so yielded to my entreaty.

"Very well," he said, "come along then!"

We followed the man some distance across the moor. He went fairly slowly, and there was no difficulty in keeping up with him. By-and-bye John stopped.

"There's no use in going any further," he said. "If we were to watch him all the way to Cloverdale, we couldn't prevent him turning and coming back when we were gone."

"I wonder what he wants," I said. "I wish you had let me ask. I can't imagine what he can possibly have to do with me."

"I don't believe his story a bit," John answered. "He probably invented it to account for his being where he was. Most likely he's a tramp of some kind, on the look-out for what he can pick up."

"Do you think he's a thief? Oh, John, the jewels!"

"Nobody knows about the jewels, except you and mother and myself."

"And Jesse," I added.

"That is not the emissary he would choose," John declared with a laugh, "even if he were as bad as you think him."

"But you didn't like him?"

"No, I didn't like him; and for that very reason, I decline to suspect him without good grounds."

"Yet you do suspect him," I thought to myself. "In spite of yourself you share some of my suspicions. Your nature could not help distrusting his."

But I kept my thoughts to myself, and we walked back the rest of the way in silence. I was in a curious mood: that trouble of John's and my own consciousness of eavesdropping lay heavy upon me, and the adventure with the strange man could not fail to make me uneasy: yet transcending and overwhelming all that caused me pain and anxiety, was the sense that for a little while, at any rate, John and I were alone together in a world of our own. The world was one of mist and darkness, and would not endure, I knew, beyond the walls of Granbigh Hold, but while it lasted I resolved to enjoy its sweetness to the uttermost; so I turned deliberately from my woman's habit of shadowing the present by dread of the future, and tasted only the actual content of the moment. That walk lives in my memory—the

hush and the strangeness and the sense of stolen happiness of it; a patch of calm and brightness in a time of doubt and suffering and dread.

It seemed as if John had been right as to the character of the watcher at the gate; for the man did not return with the morning, and during the few days which remained before our departure for London, we saw no more of him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MY MOTHER'S WILL.

MR. CROSBITT, the solicitor, was a small man, spare and neat. I remember very well, the way he looked at me that day in February, when I went into his office in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"You ran away from your guardian, Miss Wynne," he said.

"Yes," I answered, "I did."

"May I ask your reasons. You put Mrs. Pimpernel to a great deal of anxiety and distress, you know."

"I *had* reasons," I replied. "I was very unhappy, and I saw no other means of getting away."

"You should have come to me for advice."

"But I didn't even know of your existence."

"Your guardian never mentioned me to you?"

"Never."

He was silent a moment, then: "You don't care to tell me your reasons for running away, Miss Wynne," he said.

"Haven't I told you?"

He smiled. "Hardly."

"I would tell you," I said, "I would indeed; but—well very likely you would not think them sufficient, and—and on the whole, I would rather not."

I had indeed, after much consultation with John, and by his advice, determined to ignore what had taken place during those weeks before my flight. I had, after all, little or nothing to prove my fears correct, and the making or insinuating of accusations which I could not substantiate might only prejudice my position and increase my perils in the future. It was better, therefore, to be silent, leaving Mr. Crosbitt and the outside world to put down my flight to the folly of impulsive girlhood and to the effects of the brain fever.

Mr. Crosbitt regarded me attentively for a moment or two.

"May an old man give a young lady a piece of advice?" he said; "considering that the young lady is the daughter of an old friend?"

"Did you know my father?" I asked eagerly, "or my mother was it?"

"Your mother," he answered. "I knew her very well long before she was Susan Wynne."

"She was very pretty, wasn't she?"

"Very pretty. Some day I will tell you more about her. But just now we have not time. Mrs. Pimpernel will be here before long, and I want to give you that piece of advice—if you will have it."

"Of course," I said. "Go on, please."

"It is just this—don't let any pique or lovers' quarrel stand in the way of your happiness."

"Pique? Lovers' quarrel?" I exclaimed. "I have no idea what you mean."

I suppose he did not in the least believe me, for he smiled a little. "You are all alike," he said. "But don't be too proud, Miss Wynne, for you are still very young, and all your life lies before you. And forgive an old man for wanting to warn and

help you." Then he added, irrelevantly as I thought: "You have a look of your mother, you know, at times, though you're not really like her."

"But I'm not proud," I protested, "and I know I'm young, and I should be very glad of your advice; only, quite seriously and honestly, I don't know what you mean."

My earnestness evidently puzzled him.

"I understood," he said, in a slightly embarrassed way, "from Mrs. Pimpernel, that her son and you had—that in fact you were lovers."

"Lovers! Jesse and I?"

My face and voice must have shown something of what I felt, for he was obviously disconcerted.

"Yes," he went on, "and that something he had done, some fancied coldness or neglect on his part had piqued you into anger—you were very high-spirited and proud, she said—and had caused you to take matters into your own hands and run away."

At first I sat speechless, for this version of my conduct took my breath away.

"It isn't—it isn't the very least true," I gasped, when at length my indignation and astonishment found utterance. "It——"

Then there was a knock at the door; it opened; and my guardian entered the room.

Reader, I cannot tell you how I felt when I saw her. The memory of those months before my flight, with their attendant suspicions rushed headlong into my consciousness, conflicting with the everyday atmosphere of the lawyer's office, with the mental attitude from which, for so many years I had been accustomed to regard Mrs. Pimpernel, with the impression created in me by her impassive face; all of which seemed to forbid the conclusions I had arrived

at, and to stamp my fears as wild, unjustified, and absurd. Confusion, too, at the recollection of our last interview, added to my discomfort, and I did not know what behaviour it were best to adopt. My guardian, however, showed no awkwardness; having greeted Mr. Crosbitt, she advanced towards me with outstretched hand, and, as I took it—for I could not well refuse to take it—she stooped and kissed me on the forehead.

“You have caused us a great deal of anxiety,” she said, in what I called her important voice. “I am glad you fell into good hands, and that your freak had no worse consequences.”

I did not reply and I kept my eyes downcast, for I did not want her to read the defiance which I feared might look forth from them.

We proceeded immediately to the legal formalities necessary to Mrs. Pimpernel's surrender of her guardianship; and when these had been disposed of, Mr. Crosbitt turned to me, saying:

“So now, Miss Wynne, you are your own mistress. Neither Mrs. Pimpernel nor I have any further control over you, as far, that is to say, as the disposal of your income and your freedom of action is concerned, though we still maintain, as regards a large part of your capital, the position of trustees towards you. You know, I suppose, the provisions of your mother's will?”

“I have never heard anything about the will,” I answered.

“Indeed?” He knitted his brows. “I thought Mrs. Pimpernel would——”

“I have told Miss Wynne nothing,” Mrs. Pimpernel broke in. “Romantic and inclined to extravagance as she has always been, I thought it better

to bring her up in ignorance of the fortune she would inherit. I have tried to teach her how a Christian woman ought to spend both time and money, but I have not accustomed her to look forward to the possession of wealth."

"I had better then, Miss Wynne," said the lawyer, "read the will to you."

"I would rather you told me what it means," I answered.

I learned then, for the first time, that I was the absolute possessor of the third part of forty thousand pounds, and that I was entitled to the life interest of the remaining two-thirds, the capital of which was held in trust for me by Mrs. Pimpernel and Mr. Crosbitt. At my death these two-thirds were to go, one-third to a nephew of my father's, the other to Mrs. Pimpernel, or, failing her, to her children.

"Is there nothing about the jewels?" I asked.

"Jewels? No, there is nothing about jewels. I was looking at the will the other day, and I am sure there is no mention of anything of the kind. Do you know anything about jewels, Mrs. Pimpernel?"

"Yes, I knew about them; that is to say, I knew that Susan had a great deal of jewellery, very valuable jewellery, and that she had disposed of it in some way before her death, though I did not know what she had done with it."

"I don't understand," the lawyer said.

"I dare say not. It was one of Susan's strange ways of doing things." It was curious how Mrs. Pimpernel's voice softened when she spoke of my mother. "She wrote me a letter, to be given to me after her death, and in it she said that she had disposed of the jewels in a way she thought I might

not like, and so did not want me to know what she had done till many years had passed, when I should no longer be angry with her." Mrs. Pimpernel paused: she seemed strangely moved. "I wish she hadn't taken that way," she said, "I wish she hadn't. I wish she had handed them over to some safe keeping in an open way."

"And the letter," suggested Mr. Crosbitt. "Was there anything further?"

"The letter went on to say," continued Mrs. Pimpernel, "that when Hester came of age the jewels would be handed over to her upon application to the person who had the keeping of them. That person's name and address she did not tell me; it would be found, she said, inside a locket, fastened round Hester's throat and which was not to be opened till her twenty-third birthday."

"Extraordinary!" murmured the lawyer.

"Inside the letter was a key," Mrs. Pimpernel went on, "the key which opened the locket and loosed the chain. She gave it into my keeping," she said, with the explanation of it, to show—"the voice trembled a little—"to show how much she trusted me, though she was doing what she thought I wouldn't like."

"Has the locket been opened?"

Mrs. Pimpernel hesitated before she answered. She was thinking, I suppose, of the lost key.

"Yes, and the jewels have been handed over to Miss Wynne."

"I may know, I suppose, to whom she had entrusted them."

It was I who answered: "To Mr. James Bra-brook. He is dead; it was his son who gave them over to me."

The lawyer's thoughts seemed to have fled far from the dusty room in which we sat.

"Poor Susan," he muttered, "poor Susan!" Then he turned to Mrs. Pimpernel with a strange little smile. "She was always a little afraid of you, I think."

"Yes. But I saved her—I did save her, Mr. Crosbitt, from much misery."

"I suppose so. Yes, no doubt—I suppose so. It was better as it was."

I did not understand all this, but suddenly I remembered something and put my hand into my pocket.

"I have a letter, Mr. Crosbitt, for you," and I handed him the letter which I had found in the box of jewels.

Something moved him, evidently, as he opened and read it, and for a while he did not speak; then:

"The letter is from your mother, Miss Wynne," he said. "It states that if you should not live to claim the jewels, they are to remain in the possession of James Brabrook or his descendants. It has, of course, no legal value."

For a space we were all silent; it was Mrs. Pimpernel who spoke first. Rising she came towards me.

"Beta is very anxious to see you. Will you come and see her?" she said; then, as I remained silent: "Jesse is away," she added.

Now I had made up my mind that I would never enter the house in Regent's Gate again.

"Won't she come and see me at the hotel?" I asked.

"No. My daughter knows nobody who will not come to my house."

I still hesitated. I particularly did not want to go to Mrs. Pimpernel's house; yet the desire to see Beta, to hear all that had happened to her since my flight, was strong in proportion to my affection; and if she herself was anxious to see me, I could not refuse. Pride and prudence gave way, and I answered:

"I will come."

It was settled that I was to go that very afternoon, and then Mrs. Pimpernel took her leave, shaking hands with me as she had done on entering, but without repeating the formal kiss.

"It is a pity," remarked Mr. Crosbitt when we were left alone, "that you have quarrelled with Mrs. Pimpernel."

"It is hardly a quarrel," I returned.

"No, a quarrel takes two, and Mrs. Pimpernel seems to have no unfriendly feeling towards you. It is a pity, I should rather say, that you have taken offence."

It seemed such a curiously inadequate way of representing my attitude towards Mrs. Pimpernel that I nearly laughed.

"It is hardly that either," I said.

"I don't want to interfere or be tiresome," Mr. Crosbitt went on, "but as you have lived with these people all your life, I cannot help feeling sorry that there should be a breach between you, and I presume now upon my age and upon my old friendship for your mother, to ask you if it is impossible that it should be healed."

"It isn't an ordinary sort of breach, you know," I answered. "If you knew—but I dare say you would think I was all wrong, and I believe it is better not to try to explain." Indeed in the prosaic atmos-

phere of Mr. Crosbitt's office, it would be hard, I knew, to make my story seem anything but the imaginings of a distorted fancy, and I decided that I could not attempt it. "I am going to see Beta this afternoon," I finished up.

"Is Beta the daughter?"

"Yes, and my very great friend."

"I have seen very little of Mrs. Pimpernel since her marriage," Mr. Crosbitt went on after a momentary pause. "We never took to each other much when we were young, and for many years it is only business matters which have brought us together. But I always respected her—yes, I always had a respect for Clarissa Howson, as she was in those old days when I saw much of her."

"I can't imagine her young," I said, "or—or in love you know, or anything."

The lawyer smiled. "I don't know that she ever was in love; certainly she never gave me the impression of there being anything romantic in her affection for her husband. But then Mr. Pimpernel—Well, well, he was worthy, and—substantial." He paused, and his brisk voice took on a shade of dreaminess. "No," he went on, "the romance of Mrs. Pimpernel's life was her love for your mother?"

"Was she *really* very fond of her?"

"There could be no doubt of that I think. It was a curious friendship, for the two were extraordinarily different in character—though perhaps that was the cause of it. I think it must have been your mother's gentleness and timid ways, her simplicity and yieldingness which appealed to something in Clarissa's certainly rather hard nature, and roused in her a sort of passionate affection which

is the strongest, as I believe, that she has ever known."

"Except for Jesse," I put in.

"Her son? Is that so?"

"Yes, only it's different. *He* dominates *her*."

"I shouldn't have thought anybody could have dominated Clarissa. Certainly in her friendship with Susan, she did all the dominating. She ruled her absolutely."

"Did she interfere in her love affairs?" I asked.

A shade crossed my companion's face. "Not in all. In one case she most distinctly and decisively did. If it had not been for Clarissa, Susan would have married James Brabrook."

"It's a mistake, I believe," I said, "to interfere in other people's love affairs."

He smiled again as he looked at me. "Is that your experience?"

I felt the little bite of sarcasm in his words. "One has other people's experiences to go by as well as one's own," I replied with what I meant for dignity.

The smile remained on his face, but there was nothing but kindness in his voice as he answered. "Of course, of course. And you have Susan's hair."

I did not see the connection between the two parts of his speech, and I suppose my face showed that I was puzzled.

"Miss Wynne," he went on, "you may have thought me impertinent once or twice in the course of this interview, in offering advice or inviting confidence; but I will tell you before you go, why I am more than usually interested in you, why I am

anxious that life should go smoothly with you, why I wish you at the beginning to avoid mistakes which may lead to the marring of it. Clarissa Howson and I, unsympathetic as we were to one another, had yet one thing in common—our devotion to your mother.”

As he spoke the lines in his face deepened, and his voice faltered slightly, I thought, on the last words. All the romance in me leaped up and stirred me to emotion. “Oh,” I breathed in a delicious thrill of wonder and pity, “were you in love with her?”

Again he smiled, but somewhat pitifully, I thought.

“I suppose so.” His thoughts seem to travel far away from Lincoln’s Inn Fields. “It’s a long time ago,” he said.

“And she—?” I ventured after a moment, tentatively.

“She? Oh no, she never cared for me. I was one of many. There were a good many of us, Miss Wynne. She was not, I suppose, a clever woman, or particularly wise or strong; but there was something—the thing they call charm perhaps—there were many of us who would have given our all for her sake: and though I am an old fogey now, I was young then, Miss Hester, as well as Mrs. Pimpernel.”

His face looked so gentle and so kindly as he spoke, and his love for my mother seemed to bring me so much nearer to him, that I was tempted then and there to tell him all my troubles; but I remembered the words with which he had prefaced the story of that love: “I will tell you before you go,” and I thought that perhaps he had no more time to

give me and had intended to hint as much ; and so I checked the impulse towards making him my confidant, and left him under the erroneous impression which he had received from Mrs. Pimpernel. Afterwards I was sorry, as one so often is—afterwards, when it is too late.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BETA AND I FALL OUT AND MAKE IT UP AGAIN.

BETA was watching for me at the dining-room window. She met me in the hall, and we flew into each other's arms. How glad I was to see her again! I think, indeed, that until that moment I had not realised how dear she was to me. She dragged me into our own little room, the pigsty, and there we sat down on two chairs and looked at one another and found at first nothing to say, and hardly knew whether to laugh or cry. I saw then that she was looking thinner and paler than when we had parted, and presently I began to ask her about her Bob.

"Oh, Bobby," she said, "comes here sometimes, and he's his uncle's heir it seems (Jesse found that out), and Mother is fairly agreeable to him."

"Only fairly?"

"Well sometimes more than others. I think she hesitates between God and mammon, you know, for I'm sure she thinks it would be a good match and yet she's not satisfied with what she calls his principles."

"What *are* his principles?" I enquired.

"I don't think he's got any," answered Beta with that naïve simplicity which often made me laugh, and made me laugh now.

"How dreadful!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, you know what I mean, Hester," Beta said. "He's not a church-worker, or an anti-ritual-

ist or any of the things that Mother thinks people ought to be. He's just an ordinary nice person, and he's clean and well dressed and good tempered and kind, and I like him ever so much better than if he were a cross professing Christian." I knew so well what she meant, for Christianity in the Pimpernel household was not an encouraging creed.

"But it's all going on right, so far, Beta," I said, "and you are quite happy?"

"It's going on all right, I suppose. But oh, Hester, how can I be happy with you going off like that and leaving me all that time without a word?"

Her eyes filled with tears, and I saw her mistily for a little while through the drops which came into mine, for it hurt me horribly to give pain to Beta, and I knew that I should have to distress her still further.

"Dear," I said, "I couldn't help it, and I can't even explain. If you only knew! But I can never tell you, and you will just have to go on thinking badly of me."

"I shall never think badly of you, Hester, never, never, no matter what they say; but I could not bear the silence and the anxiety, and I thought you might have written me just one line."

"But I dared not. I was so afraid they would get hold of the letter, and I wanted above all things that they should not know where I was."

"But Jesse said he knew—that you had written to him, and I thought if you wrote to Jesse——"

"Wrote to Jesse! I would have cut my hand off first. How could you believe such a thing?"

"I didn't at first, but—Hester, you're *not* in love with him?"

I was so angry that I flung away the hand she

had placed on my knee, and leaving my chair, stamped up and down the room, too enraged for speech. That Beta—Beta who knew me, could conceive, even for an instant—! Mr. Crosbitt had been bad enough, but this was more than I could stand. Presently I stopped in front of her. “And pray,” I said in my nastiest tones—and I know my voice can sound horrid at times, when I am really put out—“has Jesse refused my love with scorn? or are we about to be married, and when?”

Beta’s round face had grown longer, those full child-like lips of hers were quivering, and tears stood in her soft, honest eyes.

“Oh, Hester!” was all she said.

“You know so much more about it than I do,” I went on, still in the horrid voice, “that I shall be glad if you will give me some information.”

She did not answer, but only looked at me with that pitiful look.

“Well?” I said, hardening my heart, as one does against people one loves when they have hurt one. Still she did not answer; only the tears overflowed and fell over her round cheeks with great splashes down into her lap. Then my heart melted, as I had known, indeed, all along that it must and would, for I never could stand out against Beta when she was in what I called a wounded animal mood; and so I had to kneel down beside her and wipe away her tears and say: “There, there!” Then after a time, she told me that Jesse had declared my flight to be the result of pique, that he had called me a little spitfire, and said my behaviour was just like me, that he had announced the reception of a letter from me, and had stated that by-and-bye he would put everything straight again.

"I didn't believe it, Hester, I never for an instant believed it," Beta asseverated, "except that I thought you might possibly have been obliged to write to him about money or something; and I only asked you—indeed, I only asked you, because I wanted to hear what you would say."

"And you didn't like it when you did hear," I remarked grimly.

"You know I think he does want to marry you," Beta said presently, almost in a whisper.

"I know he does," I answered, "but I can't think why. Except," I added suddenly—it was very stupid of me, I know, but until that moment I had not realised that I was wealthy, and that Jesse had always known of my wealth—"except—why I'm an heiress of course."

How clear it all seemed now, except about the jewels; his desire for such speedy possession of them still puzzled me.

"I wonder if he's in debt?" I said.

"I don't know," Beta answered, "but there's something odd about him; he is always appearing and disappearing, and the other day he went off quite suddenly without the least warning."

I left Beta very miserable over the knowledge that I was no longer going to live in her mother's house, and I was obliged to promise that I would come and see her from time to time; and indeed for my own sake alone, I could not resign myself to the idea of parting from her altogether. My affection was stronger than my fears, my pride, and the rancour which I could not but feel towards Mrs. Pimpernel and her son, and I let my heart guide my head.

CHAPTER XXX.

JESSE PIMPERNEL SAYS GOOD-BYE.

BEFORE we left London, Mrs. Pimpernel came to call upon Mrs. Brabrook. The two women had already met at Granbigh Hold while I lay ill and unconscious, and I had often wondered, and had never been able to gather from Mrs. Brabrook's scanty accounts of the visit, how they had got on. I was very much interested now to see them together; and puzzled; for they seemed to me to be fundamentally different, and yet to have something in common which bridged over the differences between them. Looking back now, I think that the bond consisted in a common condemnation of the sins of the flesh above all other sin; instinctive in Mrs. Brabrook, whose nature was essentially Puritan; adopted, on the part of Mrs. Pimpernel, as being the point of view of the society and the religious body to which she belonged. The one knew no temptation of the grosser kinds; the other—except in the direction of muffins, hot buttered toast and highly flavoured sauces, which I think, judging by her practice she must have excluded from the list of fleshly indulgences—had never encountered any: and both abjured the most conspicuous teaching of the faith they professed, by uncompromising judgment of those whose temptations they did not under-

stand. Sincerity too, united them; for now, as I look back through the years that divide me from that time of suffering, I believe that Mrs. Pimpernel was sincere in her desire after goodness, that narrow and selfish as was her creed, she was genuine in her profession of it, and that her active dislike of me arose from the fact that I was, though unwillingly and indirectly, the cause of her falling away from her own standard of right. What a contrast they were, I thought, the two women, as they sat and discussed the hollowness of the world—by which, I gathered, they meant society in general: John's mother, slight and active, with her beautifully cut face, her soft gray hair, and her clothes dainty in their simplicity; and Mrs. Pimpernel, stout, and sallow, imperious in manner, confident in aspect, with garments aggressively disdainful of beauty and the fashion. Towards the end of her visit she announced that Jesse was about to leave England.

"For long?" Mrs. Brabrook enquired.

"I don't know for how long: he says for many years."

As she spoke, she turned and looked at me, and I saw hatred in her glance. Could I have anything to do with his going, I wondered, to cause that look? At any rate it helped me to hide the relief I felt at the news; and knowing how uncontrolledly she loved the man I so dreaded, I could not but pity her. As she said good-bye, she repeated that bitter glance.

"It's because of you he's going," she said in a low tone.

I made no reply, and indeed, I was bewildered. I had no atom of belief in Jesse's avowed affection, and I could not conceive why I should be responsible for his departure. At any rate I could not but re-

joyce that he was going away; until the sea rolled between us, I felt, I should not be free from the fear with which he inspired me. I arose the next morning, happy in the thought that I should probably never see him again, and as the train rolled out of Paddington station on the journey back to Devonshire, I breathed a great breath of relief, hoping that my trials were at an end.

But I had not yet seen the last of Jesse Pimpernel. Two days after our return to Granbigh Hold, when I came in from a walk, I found him in the drawing-room, and he informed me that he had come all the way from London to say good-bye to me.

"I must see you alone, little Hester, before I go," he said, as he took his leave that afternoon. "I shall come back again in the morning, and I hope you will give me half an hour."

"I don't see what you can have to say to me," I answered. "It can be nothing, at any rate, that I want to listen to."

"I *have* something to say, nevertheless, and you must listen to it."

"Then say it now," I said, for we were standing in the hall, and Mrs. Brabrook, after bidding him good-bye, had gone back into the drawing-room.

"No," he replied, "I must see you once again Hester"; and then, before I knew where I was, he had bent over my hand, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

I was very angry: that he should think it possible to flatter me by his attempts at love-making was an insult to my intelligence; the touch of his lips was loathsome to me; and on the impulse of the

moment, I whipped out my handkerchief and rubbed the place which they had touched. He was a vain man, and the action stung him more, I think, than any speech I could have made. I shall never forget the look he gave me; a momentary one, for he changed his expression instantly; but the look remained with me and haunted me that night in my dreams.

I told John about the next morning's interview. "*Must* I see him, do you think?" I asked.

"I don't see exactly how you can refuse," he answered, "and it will soon be over, and then we shall have done with him, I hope, for ever."

The morning, I have always thought, is a good time for doing unpleasant things. One has not many hours of suspense and looking forward, for one thing; and one's courage is higher, I think, when the day is broad and young. So I did not feel particularly nervous as the time for seeing Jesse drew near—not half so nervous as I had felt when thinking about it in the night; I was a little curious as to what he might have to say to me; but I thought the chief reason for his coming was probably because he knew I didn't want him. His manner at the beginning of the interview was wonderfully deprecating and subdued. He began by entreating my forgiveness for the many ways in which he had unwittingly and unwillingly offended me; he spoke of lifelong devotion, of the perils of desperation, of the salvation that lay in a woman's love; finally, in passionate, and I must say, wonderfully effective language, he renewed and pressed upon me, his offer of marriage. His importunity distressed, besides displeasing me; it was distasteful to me to see him, grovelling, as it were, mentally and morally in the

attempt to win the fortune, which, I was well persuaded, was my sole attraction in his eyes.

"Have I not shown you," I said at last, "have I not by every possible means shown you that I both dislike and distrust you?"

Then his manner changed; he looked at me fixedly, and when he spoke, his words came slowly.

"You have," he said, "little Hester, indeed you have."

"Then what is the good——"

He interrupted me. "No good. I understand. It is no good. I shall woo you no more, little Hester."

"Then let it be good-bye at once," I said.

"Yet," he continued, as though he had not heard me, "I could and should have won you, if you had not fallen in love with that maniac."

"What do you mean?" I asked—calmly enough, for the term he used did not convey to me his meaning.

"That dipsomaniac, your host; son of a dipsomaniac, and father of more, if he persuades you into marrying him."

I thought only of the second word of his speech.

"It is utterly false," I cried. "He has never even tasted anything that could make him what you say."

"Don't you be too sure; but even so, it's bound to come, sooner or later."

"Never," I asserted, "with a man like him."

Jesse laughed.

"A man like him! John drunk and John sober are two different people. Have you ever seen a man blind or mad drunk?"

"Often," I replied, which, by the way, was not

true, for my experience of drunkenness was confined to the occasional encounter of staggering figures in the streets; but I did not reflect on the accuracy of my reply, and, in the heat of the moment, I believe I would have said anything which I thought at all likely to annoy or disconcert Jesse.

"Well, wait till you see your beloved wildly drunk," he went on, "as you probably will before long. As for keeping up his teetotalism! Do you think I was blind that day at lunch, little Hester?"

"I'm sorry," I replied, "that he's not at home to come and turn you out; so I must ask you to leave the house in the ordinary way."

"Oh, he's not at home. Is he away, may I ask?"

"Oh, no; he's only gone into Cloverdale. It's market day. But there are several men about the farm."

"Market day!" Jesse's utterance quickened. "Does he stay there long?"

"I don't see that it's any business of yours," I said. "Good-bye."

I walked to the door and held it open. "Good-bye," I repeated.

He crossed the room slowly and paused in front of me.

"Is it good-bye, little Hester? Is it good-bye?"

"I hope so." My hands were behind my back as I leaned against the open door.

"Not even your hand?" he said.

I only looked at him, and then, without further speech, he passed out of the room and across the hall and disappeared through the front door.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PARLOUR AT THE GEORGE INN.

I WATCHED him take his way through the garden and out by the postern gate. I was hidden behind the curtain, but I need not have troubled to conceal myself, for he never looked back. When I was quite sure he was gone, I left the window, and sat down on a little stool in front of the fire and—no, I did not think; it was not thought that held me; something more indefinite it was which kept me motionless there. After a while the luncheon bell rang, and I went into the dining-room in a dreamy, abstracted state.

“Did Mr. Pimpernel come?” asked Mrs. Brabrook.

“Yes,” I answered, “and he’s gone.”

“For good?”

I had a little goose-quill creeping of the flesh. “Or for bad,” I said.

“You are a person of prejudices, Hester,” Mrs. Brabrook said rebukingly.

“And presentiments,” I added.

“Presentiments are absurd and false.”

“Mine are generally true.”

“You have no right to judge Jesse Pimpernel.”

“I don’t judge him. I—I——” At last I found the right word. “I fathom him,” I said.

Then she said no more, as her way was, nor did I speak again till the end of the meal, when I announced that I was going for a walk.

"It's the best thing you can do," she said. "You brood too much, Hester. Are you going far?" she added.

"I think so. I should like a long walk."

"Then perhaps—would it be too far for you to go into Cloverdale? I want some more of that gray yarn, and I have just snapped one of my knitting needles. You could drive back with John."

"It would not be at all too far. I should like to go," I said.

"You had better start soon then."

"Yes, I will," I assented, and I went upstairs at once to get ready.

The day was mild, one of those soft warm days that come sometimes in early spring. In the night it had blown a gale, and in my intervals of wakefulness I had lain and listened to the sweeping skirts of the wind as it brushed the moor, and to the lone booming of the ocean beating against the cliffs. Now the wind was hushed to a gentle breeze, but I still could hear those surging waves moaning about the rocks. I had never yet been to the cliffs, and to-day the desire was strong upon me to reach them; but I could not go there now; I must hurry on my way. Strange the sadness that lay upon me, strange the unformulated fear, and strange that Mrs. Bra-brook's yarn and knitting needles should have given me an excuse for doing the very thing I wanted to. For I wanted very much to go to Cloverdale; a note in Jesse's voice, a look upon his face had roused in me a curious sense of impending danger; danger not to myself so much as to John: and, though I could

not conceive how, and especially on that very afternoon, Jesse could possibly injure him, I felt an ardent desire to warn the one man against the other.

I reached Cloverdale still early in the afternoon. It was market day, and the streets of the little town were unusually busy. I passed through them, keenly on the alert, on the look-out for the two men whose faces were so vividly before me. I saw no sign of either of them; and after I had made my purchases, I strolled through the market-place, hoping I might catch sight of John. But no, he certainly was not there, and I resolved to make my way to the George Inn and, if I did not see him about, to find Timmins the coachman, tell him that I was going to drive back in the gig, and ask him what time his master intended to start for home and if he could tell me where he was. There was quite a little crowd about the George, and people continually passing in and out of the bar. I saw neither John nor Timmins, and as there were several rough looking men in the street, some of whom did not appear to be altogether sober, I did not care to linger about. I decided therefore to turn down a little side alley and enter the inn from the garden at the back. I could see the landlady in that way without going through the crowd in the bar, and she would send someone to find Timmins for me. The day was beginning to wane now, and the damp, soft air was turning chilly; the grass in the garden was heavy with moisture, and I felt a little shiver run through me as I shut to the gate after entering. I turned to walk to the inn door; and then I stood still, quite still; for close to me, within a few feet, were the two men who possessed my thoughts. A low window reaching to the ground, with the centre casement

slightly ajar, gave access to a private parlour, and in the parlour they stood. I could not hear at first what they said, though I heard their voices, but there was no need for words; the scene told its own tale, and I knew now what the danger was which I had feared, I understood the look on Jesse's face, the sound in his voice, when he had said in answer to my statement that John had gone to Cloverdale: "Does he stay there long?"

The only thing I did not understand was how he had persuaded John to come with him: the rest was easy. John stood by the fireplace; on his face, which was very pale, was an odd look; his lips were tightly pressed together; his eyes shone curiously. Jesse bent over a table on which stood a number of decanters and bottles, and poured the contents of one of them into a glass. He raised the glass and held it out towards his companion.

"To prove your good faith," I heard him say.

John shook his head; if he spoke, his answer was not audible to me. The other moved towards him.

"It must be," I think he said; "it must be. Otherwise the bargain's off."

He brought the glass nearer and nearer to the man he tempted; he raised it towards him; it seemed to me that the fumes of wine and spirits came out to me even where I stood. I saw the face I loved, drawn and white, contorted by the struggle within; I saw the evil eagerness of Jesse's expression grow in intensity; I saw him raise his hand, nearer and ever nearer, slowly and gently, as though he feared to break some spell; and I saw that John stood motionless, fascinated as it were by the thing he strove against. Hardly more than a minute, it lasted, I think, though it takes so long to tell; for the power

to move came back to me almost at once, and then, without pause or thought, I thrust back the window, and was in the room, and, dashing the glass from Jesse's hand, I stood by John's side, and clasped his hands and said: "Come!"

I never have been able clearly to remember what followed. I have a confused recollection of Jesse's face, baffled and furious, of words foul and coarse, of John's striking him on the mouth as he uttered them, and of seeing him stagger and fall back into a chair: but I remember nothing distinctly and really till I found myself in the gig by John's side, on the way to Granbigh Hold. Through all the drive home he never spoke, and I, though my heart was bleeding for him, dared to say no word. When we were quite near home, I ventured to put out my hand and lay it upon his that held the reins. For half a minute he let it lie there; then, with his other hand he lifted it, and put it away from him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ON THE CLIFFS NEAR GRANBIGH HOLD.

AT last I got to those cliffs by the edge of the Atlantic and looked over them down into the sea. It was the day after my walk to Cloverdale, and the mild, soft weather still continued. The wind had risen again during the night, and though it had sunk now, the great waves it had raised still swelled and surged, and broke their green smooth sides into foam against the rocks. The spray rose up, salt and fresh, and sprinkled me where I stood, and the cry of the sea, monotonous, despairing and continuous, was loud in my ears. Perhaps I put my own sadness into its voice, for I was both sad and anxious. John's face haunted me with the set look it had worn through the miserable constraint of yesterday evening, and the way in which he avoided me touched me to the quick. He had told his mother nothing of what had taken place, and I of course said nothing. My one desire was to revive and spur his courage, to tell him I trusted in his strength, that I honoured and in no way despised him. But all through the day he avoided me, as I have said, and I had had no chance of easing the longing I felt to comfort him.

Yet I was hardly surprised that evening when I saw him coming towards me; I was only glad; and I was determined that I would break through the

reserve with which he had hedged himself about, and would speak of that which lay uppermost in the thoughts and deepest in the hearts of both of us. He came and stood beside me.

“So you have got here at last?”

“Yes. I think one generally does what one means to in the end, don’t you?”

“No,—I don’t know.” Then quickly, “Well, perhaps what one *means* to. Not what one wants to.”

“You should mean to do what you want to,” I said, “and then it would be all right.”

“And I mean just the opposite.” He was looking straight out to sea, his eyes on the horizon. I don’t quite know what it was which impelled me to the utterance of the words I spoke next; some unformulated vague idea, I suppose, of sparing him anything in the nature of a confession, by taking confession upon myself and showing him how poor and mean I was; but quite suddenly and without premeditation, this is what I said:

“I have something to confess to you.”

He turned his eyes from the sunset to my face.

“To confess? What can you possibly have done that needs confession?”

“A meanness,” I answered, “a dishonourable, a horrible thing.”

“You, Hester?” A faint smile broke through his sadness.

“Yes, I, Hester. You will despise me when I’ve told you. I dare say you’ll never speak to me again.”

He gave a bitter little laugh, but made no other answer, and I plunged abruptly into what I had to say.

"I was there that day when you came back from Cloverdale."

"Which day?"

"When you drove Jesse to the station. I was there in the room all the time when you were talking to your mother. I meant to show myself, and then you didn't see me, and then I was afraid; and so I was there, hearing all you said, a dishonourable eavesdropper, a wretched, mean creature, altogether despicable."

John did not speak for a minute; then he said:

"I remember." Presently: "So you know all about it?" he went on. He was looking seawards again, and my eyes followed the direction of his, and I shall never forget that sunset and the bar of pale green below the space of red. "I am glad. It saves me the telling of it. So that," he added, "was how you knew what to do yesterday."

I answered him somewhat irrelevantly. "How did he persuade you to go with him?"

"He said he had something very important to confide to me about you."

"You might have known it was a lie."

"Yes, only I could not be perfectly sure, and I dared not refuse to listen to him." After a pause: "It's just as well it happened," John went on. "It has shown you plainly what I am."

"You are yourself," I answered. "That is enough for me."

"A self," he said bitterly, "haunted by one of the lowest cravings a man can have—the desire for drink."

"But you fight it."

"Fight it? Good God, yes—chiefly by keeping myself miles away from temptation—so weak am I."

"A weak man would not keep away," I said.

Then he turned to me. "Hester, you shall know the very bitterness and degradation of the thing that is in me. Don't imagine I am strong or refined, or anything else that is good. I belong really, though I have not yet joined my fellows, to the commonest kind of drunkard that disgraces the streets."

"And the stronger the desire, the greater the heroism that resists," I put in.

But he went on as though he had not heard me. "Why, the very smell of it is a temptation. You don't know how the atmosphere of that room affected me yesterday—though *he* knew, evidently, the effect it would be likely to have upon me—you don't know what I really am. You, Hester, pure in heart and mind, fastidious, nice in all you think and do, you have no idea of the degradation that was born in me. For do you know one of the things that tempts me? that I find it most difficult to resist? Well, I'll tell you, for I want you to understand. Do you know—but of course you don't—the smell, the stale overnight smell that comes out in the mornings from public houses—ordinary common public houses in the streets of London? Well, that—*that* is one of the things I find it hard to resist. To resist it I have sometimes had to go out into the road—not daring to trust myself on the pavement, lest I should be drawn in in spite of myself. Do you understand now something of what I am and of what I am likely to be?"

Reader, I barely took in the sense of his words, so fast was all my consciousness riveted on his face. It rises before me now, sensitive, wrung with pain, and I can see the pathetic lines of the mouth, the

quivering of the nostrils, the deep self-abasement and sadness in the eyes.

"John," I said, "what does it all matter?"

He looked at me in bewilderment. "Matter! Do you understand what I say? what it means?"

"Yes, I understand. But I *know* that the longer you live and strive, the stronger you will become, and that this thing you fear will lose its power over you. And even if it were not so—and it will be—what can it, what does it matter, between you and me?"

He made a sound—half a groan and half a laugh it was, and turned away. "Between you and me! That's just it—between you and me."

I waited a minute. "John," I said then, "can't I do anything?"

He faced me again. "Yes. You can go away and never let me see you again."

He hurt me so that I could not speak, for there is nothing hurts a woman so much as that the man she loves should send her away from him when he is in trouble. He went on, still looking at me.

"I suppose you know I love you," he said.

In spite of all the hurt and the trouble, my heart leapt up—so sweet the words sounded.

"I wasn't sure," I answered, "but I'm glad—glad."

"Glad!" He gave that bitter little laugh again. "You shouldn't be glad. Why are you glad, Hester?"

"Why? Why, because you are all the world to me."

"I can't understand—it seems impossible you should care for me. Ah," he went on in another tone, "how I have longed for your love! And yet

I would give my life that you had not given it to me."

"Why?" I whispered.

"Because I dare not take it."

We were both silent. I could not press upon him that which he refused, I could not tell him that I was willing to risk anything with or for him; I could say nothing, though my heart was full. It was dusk now; all the sky was gray, and the wistfulness of eventide lay upon land and sea. Still the breakers boomed and moaned and the sound of them ever since has been to me like the sound of parting and of loss.

"I have a friend," said John by-and-bye, "whom I made a year or two ago when I was in London. We met by chance and became interested in each other. He interested me because he had studied human nature and knew so much about it; I interested him because I was another study, because from the first he noticed that there was something in me which set me apart from my fellows. Well, I told him in the end what it was, and I put to him a question which I had often put to myself." He paused, and paused so long that at last I spoke.

"The question?" I said.

"The question—ought I to marry? At first he would not answer me; it was a thing he said, which I could only decide for myself; he could not take the responsibility of giving advice or even an opinion. I pressed him however, and at last: 'Is there any particular woman,' he asked, 'whom you want to marry?' I answered that there was not, and then he said: 'Well, don't let her ever come into existence.'" There was a minute's pause. "From that time," John went on, "I made up my mind—and

that day at Cloverdale fixed my resolution—that I must do without love or wife or children.”

They were almost the same words he had used to his mother, but whereas then they had fallen upon me like a dull blow, half stunning me, now they cut sharp and clear, with a pain I could not mistake and could not bear.

“Oh, no,” I cried, “oh, no.”

“Yes,” he said, “yes, Hester—apart from everything else—for the children’s sake.”

Then I was silent, and I thought of that evening at Shividallagh when I had sat before the peat fire, and dreamed dreams and wondered if love would come to me demanding sacrifice, and if I should be strong enough to make it. I had thought then that I should: it seemed harder now. Still I would do my best.

“Would it make it easier for you,” I said, “if I went away?”

“I *couldn’t* go on if you were to stay here,” he answered.

“Then I’ll go,” I said, “I’ll go, John.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PATCH OF LIGHT ON THE LAWN.

READER, I left him; as soon as I could arrange with Mrs. Loveday to meet me, I went away and left him. Mrs. Brabrook was very angry with me and with him. It was the wish of her heart that he should marry; to abstain from doing so, was to her a want of faith in that God, Whose direct interposition she looked for and found in every event of her life; and it seemed to her presumptuous on the part of her son to dare to take a consciously active part in the shaping of a fore-ordained destiny. I suppose it had been apparent to her for some time how we felt towards each other, and that she must have questioned John directly as to what had happened or was about to happen between us; for the night before I left Granbigh Hold, she came into my room and reproached me with the part I had chosen. It was hard enough to fight against myself; it was harder still to withstand the upbraidings of the mother of the man I loved. She thought, she, whose directness of outlook and concentration of purpose were apt to miss in a situation the subtler elements which suggested themselves to more complex minds, that I was afraid of what marriage with John might bring upon myself; and she scorned me—with a scorn in which the contempt of the Puritan for one

who lacked trust in the Lord was mingled with the rancour of the mother against the woman who failed her son,—for refusing, as she thought, to run the risk. She could not understand my point of view—that I would not directly or indirectly persuade him to a thing of which his soul disapproved. To her the course he had chosen was the wrong one, and she would not allow that it might be right for him though it seemed wrong to her. Right and wrong were strongly marked in her view of life, clearly defined, positive always and never in any way relative; and it was the bounden duty of everybody to urge wrong-doers towards the right. She was angry with me, and scornful; and yet, for her very scorn, for her very anger, I loved her; because of that love for John which prompted them.

She might have known that it was not easy for me to go away, but if she guessed that it was hard, she gave me no sympathy. How hard it was, I shall never forget; and apart from the heart soreness, I knew that in separating myself from John, I separated myself from the only friend who entirely believed in my story, the only person who would be watchful on my behalf, who was prepared to help, on the alert to protect me. And this was strongly borne in upon me on that very night when Mrs. Brabrook had overwhelmed me with her reproaches, my last night at Granbigh Hold. For on that night, after many weeks' cessation of the strange occurrences which had pursued me, another strange thing happened. I sat up late after Mrs. Brabrook left me, sat on the floor, leaning against the big arm-chair by the fire, and grieved over all that I was leaving. I put out the candles, not wishing it to be known by their diminished length, how long I had

watched; the firelight relieved sufficiently that darkness of which I was afraid; and besides, to-night I was too miserable for fear. I sat there till long after the hall clock had struck midnight; it must have been close upon one o'clock, I think, when at last I forced myself to rise and prepare for bed. It was my habit to look out of the window the last thing at night, and to-night, as was my wont, I drew the curtains aside, half mechanically, and looked out into the gloom. I did it in a half conscious sort of way, but almost at once my consciousness stirred and quickened and my thoughts moved in a new direction. The house was quite silent; the spirit of slumber seemed to possess it; all the dwellers in it should have been at rest. Yet one besides myself still waked and watched; for on the grass in front lay a patch of light, sent forth from a window level with my own. My first thought was of John, but almost simultaneously with the thought came the reflection that his room was at the side of the house, that my own room, indeed, was the only occupied one which looked to the front. There is something curiously startling in finding light where one looks for darkness, something much more startling, I have always thought, than when darkness takes the place of expected light; it suggests somehow, uncanny agencies, an unlawful purpose, a hostile presence. So it was with me that night; the patch of light urged my pulses to a quicker beating, and fear which was never very far distant from me at that time, came close to me and whispered dread surmisings. Then common sense told me that one of the maids on the nightly round to see if the windows were all closed and fastened, had probably left a light in one of the rooms, and, taking courage by the hand, counselled

me to go and see, urging that my refusal to obey might lead to danger from fire. So I re-lighted my candle, opened my bedroom door, and went out into the passage. It was dark in the passage, but the very darkness enabled me to observe the more easily whence came the light, for I could see a narrow streak of it beneath the door at the very end, the door in which James Brabrook had died, and in which, side by side upon the floor, John and I had uncovered and examined the jewels. It seemed to me that as I came nearer, I heard sounds within, harsh, rasping sounds, as of metal upon metal; but I would not let myself hesitate now, and I went on without pausing and turned the door handle. The door was locked. Instantly the sounds within stopped; instantly the light vanished. I turned to flee, but in turning caught my foot in my dressing-gown, stumbled, and nearly fell, letting my candle-stick drop with a clatter to the ground. I heard a sound of scurrying feet across the floor as I made for the most obvious shelter, the room nearest at hand. Into it, somehow, in the darkness, I found my way and locked the door behind me. I waited, panting, terrified; nothing happened; no hand tried the door, no murderous voice threatened me. Alone I stood in the blackness and the silence and wondered how far it was from the dawn.

By-and-bye I crept over to the window; I would see, I thought, whether the patch of light still was there. No, darkness unbroken covered all the ground, tempered to eyes which like mine had become used to it, by a faint cloud-combated light from the stars. By this faint light, looking outwards, I was just in time to see the postern gate open and close again; and I knew then that the room

next to me was empty. I did not rouse the house; it was not worth while now; I stole back to my own room and lay down in bed, and I said to myself: "The perils are not over yet, and to-morrow I part from the only friend who could and would have helped me."

But on the morrow, when the locked door, the gaping window, the picked lock in the cupboard in the wall, the attempt to force open the safe, proved that my adventure of the night could not have been imaginary, I thought but little of the perils which might lie before me; I thought only that I was leaving all I held most dear; and it was not fear but sorrow which filled my heart with heaviness.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

I LOOK OUT OF THE WINDOW.

AFTER leaving Granbigh Hold, I stayed for a week, chaperoned by Mrs. Loveday, at a private hotel in one of the streets leading off Piccadilly. I wrote to Beta, telling her my address, and asking her if she could manage to come and see me. She came rushing in one afternoon about three o'clock.

"Mother has gone to a meeting at Exeter Hall," she said, "to save the lost or something; and oh, Hester, I hope you won't mind, but I've asked Bob to come here and meet me."

"That's what you call coming to see *me*, I suppose," I said, pretending to be offended.

"Oh, Hester, you know—oh, Hester, do you really mind? You know it isn't because of that; it's because—and then he likes you so much."

"I've no doubt he's in love with me," I replied, "and that's why he's coming."

Beta looked positively alarmed for about two seconds, and then she smiled.

"You're making fun," she said, "as you always do, and I know you don't mind him coming a bit."

Then we sat down and began to talk. She had a great deal to tell me. Jesse had said good-bye and started for Liverpool two days ago, and Mrs. Pimpernel was inconsolable.

"I can't understand *anybody* being so sorry about Jesse's going as Mother seems to be," Beta remarked innocently. "Of course he's my brother, but——"

"But you don't like him," I put in, finishing the sentence for her.

She hesitated, screwed up her face and said: "No, I don't. Of course," she added in an apologetic tone, "it might have been different if I had been brought up with him."

"No doubt," I answered, willing to aid in the soothing of her conscience, though my private opinion was that the more one was with Jesse, the less one would be disposed to like him. But Beta's chief piece of news was that "it" had happened at last, "it" being the formal proposal by Captain Lockwood for Beta's hand. Mrs. Pimpernel had received the proposal in an undecided way; she had neither accepted nor refused it; she must have time, she said, to consider the question, and she would not define the limits of that time. This was too much for the suitor, who, his blood up, had declared that he must have an immediate answer, to which Mrs. Pimpernel had replied that an immediate answer meant an immediate refusal; whereupon Captain Bobby—"For my sake," said Beta with ingenuous pride—had consented to submit to her terms. "But I'm sure," the narrator ended up, "that he'll never care much for Mother."

I heartily agreed with her, and then: "So it's all right you see, our meeting without Mother's knowing," she went on, "because we really *are* engaged. Why he's given me a ring—I've got it on this afternoon, though generally I can only wear it at night—and—and of course we mean to be married in the end, whether she consents or not. I'm of age; and

we've determined," announced Beta with that naïve endeavour after tragedy which always delighted me, "we've determined to take our fate into our own hands."

"You bold, bad things," I said.

"Bad? Oh, no, Hester, you don't really think so?" She looked quite grieved.

"No, dear adventuress, not at all."

"Then why——?"

"Oh, merely for the sake of alliteration," I explained. "Brave would do quite as well. Bold and brave creatures, I congratulate you both!"

It was soon after this that Captain Bobby appeared upon the scene. I discreetly said that I had a letter to write, for I knew that if it had been John who had come in, I would have given worlds, with all my affection for Beta, that she should have gone away for a time, and withdrew to my own room. I have sometimes wondered if all the letters that one "has to write," will ever, in the form of blank sheets of note paper, rise up in judgment against one; if so, I added to my pile of accusers that day, for I did not write a line, but sat down by the window and looked idly into the street below till it should be tea time. Idly I watched the crowd of passers-by, all independent of each other, all bent upon separate aims, yet all moving, as though animated by a common impulse, in one of two directions. My hotel was not far from the Piccadilly end of the street, and from my bow window I could see into that thronged thoroughfare, and watch the concourse of people and vehicles without difficulty. Strange that there should be such a vast number of people in the world who were absolutely unknown to me; strange that amongst all the many faces which passed me by,

there should be no one face that I knew, not one that I either loved or—Stay—in that hansom edging its way through the crowd, was that not—But of course not—it couldn't be—it was quite impossible. "How one's fancies and one's fears deceive one!" I remarked to myself as I pushed back my chair from the window.

After tea Beta went to readjust her hat and veil in my room, and I was left for a few minutes alone—for Mrs. Loveday was out for the afternoon—with Captain Bobby. I don't quite know what made me do it—sometimes I think that something inside one speaks without one's reason and upper consciousness having anything to do with it—but suddenly I said to him:

"Do you like Beta's relations?"

"No," he returned, with a smile and the utmost candour. "Do you?"

"Oh, of course *I* don't," I said.

"Why *you* in particular?"

"I don't believe in them," I said.

"I don't quite follow."

I was afraid of saying too much. "I think Mrs. Pimpernel's rather a humbug, you know," I answered.

"Oh, I dare say," returned Captain Bobby easily. "Most people are who are both religious and disagreeable."

There was a pause, and then I said, very abruptly I fear: "Captain Lockwood, do you care for Beta *very* much?"

He looked at me with an odd look of inquiry.

"I don't mean to be impertinent," I went on hurriedly. "I have a really good reason for asking, but what I want to know is, would it make any

difference to you in—in marrying her, if her belongings were good or bad?”

“Why should it?” he asked. “When I marry Beta she belongs to *me*.”

“You would stick to her,” I persisted, “in spite of everything?”

He answered me somewhat stiffly. “I don’t exactly know what you mean, Miss Wynne, but I don’t quite see myself throwing over a girl I care about on account of her relations, if that’s what you’re after.”

His voice and look told me more than his words, and I was encouraged to go on. “I don’t expect you to understand me,” I said, “and I can’t explain myself; but if—troubles and difficulties arose and I—was in need of help, of counsel, would it—might I——”

He finished my stammering sentence for me. “Of course I would do anything I could to help you,” he said, looking somewhat bewildered, but very kind, “and I shouldn’t at all mind taking your part against Beta’s relations. I’m bound to quarrel with them sooner or later, and I shouldn’t myself mind if it were sooner.”

There was no time to say anything more, for just then Beta came in, and presently she and Captain Bobby took their departure together. I sat down to consider the conversation that had taken place. I did not know quite what it was which had induced me to bring it about nor why I had pursued it. That half-hour during which I had looked out into Piccadilly had revived in me the undefined sense of evil to come, from which, since hearing of Jesse’s intended departure, I had for a time escaped, and it was this uncertain dread, I suppose, which had im-

pelled me towards finding out whether, in a crisis, I could dare to appeal to Beta's lover for aid without imperilling Beta's chances of happiness. Presumably I could, but perhaps, I thought, in a foolish ostrich-like attempt to hide from my own convictions, the need may never arise.

CHAPTER XXXV.

I MAKE A PROMISE.

I WENT with Mrs. Loveday to a charming house I had taken not far from Jenny's farm. I had sent Jenny back the money she had lent me long ago, of course, and written to her to tell her of my safety. She was delighted at the idea of my settling down near her, but I did not look so well, she said, as she would have liked to see me.

"You've got a forlorn sort of look about you," she remarked. "You ought to have a husband to take care of you."

"Oh, no, I shall never marry," I announced with the unwavering certainty of youth. "I expect to live here all my life, Jenny."

I led a strange, quiet life in my pretty house. Mrs. Loveday suited me very well as a chaperon: she left me alone and was not obtrusive in any way. Some of the neighbours called, and occasionally I went out to tea; but I saw very few people, and I thought a great deal of John and his mother and all I had left behind me at Granbigh Hold.

In the summer I wrote and asked Beta to come and stay with me. I hardly expected that Mrs. Pimpernel would let her accept the invitation, but to my delight and surprise she was allowed to come, and one happy afternoon in the beginning of July, I drove my gray ponies to the station to meet her.

She looked very distinguished, I thought, as she walked along the platform and more fashionable than ever.

"You'll *never* look like a Christian worker," I said, as we marched out of the little station.

"But I don't want to," Beta said with her wide-eyed look.

I laughed. "No, but your mother does."

"Oh, Mother!" There was an odd tone in her voice, I thought, and her face which had been so bright at our meeting became clouded and anxious. She assured me, however, that there was nothing the matter, and almost immediately began to ask me questions about myself.

"I never thought Mrs. Pimpernel would let you come," I said presently.

"Oh, yes," Beta answered, "she says she is most anxious there should be no unfriendly feeling between us, and hopes we shall often exchange visits."

"Oh, I don't know about *exchanging*," I said. "I could never go and stay at your house, Beta."

"Couldn't you? Oh, Hester, but you might!"

I couldn't think what was the matter with Beta; she seemed unduly distressed as she spoke, and all the way home and after we got home, I thought her manner curiously nervous and unlike herself. Perhaps, I thought, it was because we had not met for so long, and were not quite at our ease with one another; yet on my side I felt no embarrassment in being with Beta, and it was unlike her direct, simple nature to let absence affect our friendship. The idea of her having been prejudiced against me, I did not for one moment entertain, trusting her loyalty thoroughly. I fancied she rather evaded my questions about Captain Bobby: things were going on

in the same way, as when we had last met, I gathered from her somewhat scanty and hesitating replies, but nothing was settled.

"Perhaps she's worried about her engagement," I thought that night after I had left her in her room and gone to my own, "and that makes her seem different; or perhaps it's what I've so often heard, that people really do change after they are engaged. I'm second of course now, instead of first, but still, it didn't seem to make any difference or any awkwardness between us before." There must be something besides the mere fact of Beta's engagement I felt sure, to account for her nervousness and want of spirits, and I determined, if possible, to break down the barrier which seemed to have reared itself between us. But it was not easy. After a day or two, certainly, she became more like her old self, and we had many happy, careless hours together; but I could not get over the impression that she had something on her mind which she was hiding from me, she, who had never before in all the years we had been together, kept back the slightest thing that had happened to her; and the impression made me uneasy.

Mrs. Loveday was delighted with Beta. "Such a charming girl," she said. "I don't wonder you are fond of her. And I'm sure," she added, "that you did not do her brother justice. A brother and sister could not be so widely different as you suppose."

"You and I will never agree about Jesse Pimpernel," I answered with a laugh. Yes, I laughed, for I could afford to laugh now that Jesse was miles and miles away, with that wide Atlantic ocean and all its storms between him and me. Mrs. Pimpernel had heard from him twice since his arrival in

America, Beta said, and seemed more reconciled now to his having gone.

"I only hope he'll stay there," I said with a glance at Mrs. Loveday, who expressed, by a little shake of the head, her disapproval of my uncharitable attitude, as she considered it.

"Oh, I hope so," Beta echoed, with a fervour so much greater than my own, as to startle me and to cause Mrs. Loveday to drop her knitting.

At last it came to the evening before Beta's return home. We had both been rather depressed all day, and Beta was more nervous and strange than ever, utterly unlike the girl I had known a few months ago. It was a lovely evening, mild, soft and sweet, and after dinner I proposed that we should go for a stroll in the fir tree avenue which ran from the house right down to the road which divided my grounds from Jenny's farm. Always in that avenue there was a sound as of the sea, sometimes tempestuous and wild, sometimes a mere murmur, as of distant, gently breaking waves; but never have I walked along that aisle of trees without hearing the sea voice utter itself through the branches. To-night it spoke very softly, and the beautiful evening light had not yet been vanquished by the dusk, as Beta and I strolled down between the fields which stretched away on either side of the trees. We were silent at first, for somehow that reserve of Beta's had caused a slight awkwardness between us. I made one or two casual, unmeaning remarks, to which she replied in an absent way, and then, very abruptly, and with an effort, as I felt:

"Hester," she said, "you will come and stay with us, won't you? I may tell Mother that you'll come, when we go away for the summer?"

"No, I told you I couldn't come," I answered. "And surely you must see how awkward it would be for me after what has passed."

"But I want you so much," she implored, and truly she looked as if her whole happiness depended on my answer.

"I'll come up for the day and see you before you go," I said. "You know it isn't because I don't want to be with you; you know I miss you frightfully. But surely, surely, Beta, you must see how impossible it is."

"I came to you," she replied in a dogged sort of way.

"That's quite different, and you know it is?"

"No, I don't. And I came to you first."

Her look, her voice, her whole manner were so entirely different from anything I had ever known in her before that I was puzzled as well as disposed to be angry. I was about to answer hotly, when suddenly the absurdity of quarrelling with Beta came over me.

"Oh, Beta, Beta!" I cried, "don't let us be ridiculous and quarrel! Come now, I'll make a bargain with you. When you're married, I'll come and stay with you as long as ever you like!"

"I shall never be married," she said wildly, "if you don't come."

I looked at her in amazement; either she was mad, or I was, or there was something very extraordinary behind all this.

"Come and sit down," I said, and I led her by the hand to a fallen branch which served very well for a seat. "Now," I said, "what's the meaning of it all?"

She looked at me miserably, but said nothing.

"Out with it," I went on. "You've got to tell me just what's the matter, and put an end to this ridiculous reserve which has stood between us—you know it has—through the whole of your visit."

"I *can't* tell you. It's only that—that Mother wants you so much to come and stay, and—and I knew you wouldn't."

"But I cannot see why that should cause a breach between us, or why there should be any mystery about it. Nor can I believe that Mrs. Pimpernel can be the least desirous of ever having me in her house again."

"She says that it makes a scandal, that after living with us all those years, people think it so odd that you never—that unpleasant things have been said—and that it would be the only way to stop the talking."

"I don't care about the talking. They can say what they like as far as I'm concerned."

"But she said I *must* persuade you."

Beta seemed to me much more distressed than the occasion warranted, and I felt rather vexed with her for being, as I thought, so exaggeratedly concerned.

"Must is not for mortals," I rejoined. "You can tell her you did your best and failed."

She did not answer, and for awhile I sat quite still and listened to that low sound in the tree-tops and felt the dusk come creeping over the fields. By-and-bye I heard an odd little gasping beside me and looked round. Beta was crying. Instantly my vexation vanished.

"Beta, Beta, whatever is the matter?"

Then her tears flowed freely.

"It—it means so much to *me*," she sobbed.

"What does?" I asked, at my wits' end. "Oh,

dear, dear girl, do for heaven's sake, explain to me what you mean!"

"I meant not to tell you, because I—I don't want to influence you. But she says—Mother says, that she will never allow me to marry while there's a slur upon the family."

"What nonsense!" I exclaimed indignantly. "And besides that's a question for Bobby, not for her."

"Yes, of course," Beta agreed eagerly, "and of course *he* doesn't mind."

"There's nothing to mind," I put in.

"No there isn't. But she says—" and Beta grew agitated again—"she says that if you won't come, the engagement must be broken off."

"Run away," I suggested.

"Yes," said Beta uncertainly, "only Bob's only got his pay, you see, just now, except what his uncle allows him, though he *will* be very rich; and he'd much rather do it fair and square, as he says, because he doesn't know what effect a run-away marriage would have upon his uncle, who is rather a particular old gentleman, it seems."

"Hem!" I said, and sat and thought awhile. "So it comes to this," I went on presently, "that you were allowed to come on this visit in order to try and persuade me to go and stay with your mother, and the threat of separating you from your Bobby was used to spur you on."

"Yes," agreed Beta. "You always see into things so clearly, Hester."

"*This* stone wall has more holes in it than most," I rejoined. "But why on earth," I added, "didn't you tell me all this before?"

"Oh, I wanted to, and it's made me so miserable

all the time, and I felt underhanded, trying to persuade you for my own advantage and not telling you the reason. But I was so afraid that if I did, you would come because of what it meant to me, and I knew you wouldn't want to."

"Of course I would," I said, "and will. And you might just as well have told me at the beginning, for you're not a bit of good at hiding things."

"No, I'm not," she agreed humbly. "Only—only, you're not really coming, Hester."

"Yes, I am. *Of course* I am." For what else could I do? I thought.

"But you'll hate it so!"

It was delightful to see Beta's face, sweet and happy as I used to know it.

"I dare say there may be a certain amount of hate going about," I answered, "during my visit; but it won't last for ever, and when you're married, I need never go near your family again."

So we settled it, and the dusk was turned into sunshine for Beta that evening, I could see. For my part, I felt a sort of chill and loneliness creep into my spirit. Was it that Beta was going away tomorrow and I knew how much I should miss her? Was it that the promise I had given, cast upon me a foreshadowing of fear? or was it simply that the sound in the tree-tops had changed to a sort of moan, and that the dusk had overtaken and swallowed the last of the evening light?

CHAPTER XXXVI.

I REMEMBER A FACE AND SEE A VISION.

MRS. PIMPERNEL had taken a house in Scotland, within thirty miles or so of the east coast and pretty far north. She tried hard to persuade me to pay my visit in September; but I had promised to spend a few days with Mr. Crosbitt and his sister in Midlothian the end of that month, and another few days with some friends of my father's whom I had never seen, and as it suited Mrs. Loveday better to go away in the late autumn, I wrote to my godmother and said that I could not be with her till October, and that I feared, if she could not receive me then that the visit would have to fall through. Upon that she replied that of course she would be pleased to have me at any time, though September was a better month for enjoying myself and she knew that I would wish to be a great deal out of doors.

I started for Scotland with not too light a heart. My first visit was to be to strangers; my second would not be much better, for I knew Mr. Crosbitt very little and his sister not at all; and beyond loomed that fortnight which I had promised to spend with Mrs. Pimpernel. I dreaded it before I left Chalfont, I dreaded it as I travelled north, I dreaded it through many of the days and most of the nights which I spent in Midlothian and Ayrshire; and though I told myself I was ridiculous and morbid

and a coward, I dreaded it nevertheless. My journey from London to Edinburgh was uneventful, save for one incident, curious perhaps, but in no way, as I told myself, really remarkable. As I made my way along the platform at Euston, I passed, getting into a third-class carriage a figure which in some way was known to me. How, I could not at first tell, and memory's suggestions, elusive as they sometimes are, flitted for some half-hour to no purpose through my brain. Then suddenly I remembered—my walk in the garden with John, the pair of eyes through the grille; the figure was the figure of the man we had found loitering outside the gate at Granbigh Hold, dimly seen, yet firmly stamped upon the background of my observation. It was something in the nature of a coincidence that we should be travelling north together, and at each stopping place I found myself on the look-out to see whether he left the train. I did not see anything of him all the way, but at Edinburgh, hurrying along the platform, I met him face to face. As I passed him we exchanged glances, and I fancied somehow that there was recognition in his eyes. Soon, however, the thought of him passed from my mind; I found myself at my journey's end in a house full of gay and happy people, intent upon amusing themselves; and during the days I spent in their company my mind dwelt but little on the past or the future.

At Mr. Crosbitt's, I had more leisure in which to think, and as my visit to Mrs. Pimpernel was now very near, the prospect of it began again to cast a shadow on my spirit. I strove against the shadow, more especially as there seemed no substance for its origin, for Mr. Crosbitt's view of the case was surely the natural and sensible one.

“So you and your godmother have agreed to forget and forgive, Miss Hester,” he said. “I’m very glad of it, for Mrs. Pimpernel, though she likes to be commander-in-chief and is a bit dour, as they say here, at times, can be a staunch friend. It is generous of her to have made advances after your little falling out, and I am very glad that you, on your side, have had the generosity and the good sense to meet her half-way.”

How could I tell him after such a speech, that my opinion of my godmother was far other than his, that my generosity was swallowed in doubts and my good sense in forebodings? If that day in his office I had followed my impulse and told him all that was in my heart, that day when his talk of my mother had let loose a spring of kindly indulgent feeling towards her daughter, perhaps I might have been tempted to tell him of the trouble, fanciful though it might be, that darkened now every day; perhaps when a letter came from Mrs. Pimpernel, saying that there was but small accommodation for servants at Glamarnie and that therefore she was sorry to be unable to take in my maid, I might have told him of the dread which that letter stimulated: but prosaic, common-sense, hard-headed lawyer and man of the world as he was, I could not without preface confess to him my fears, especially since, as I have said before, those fears when actually formulated, appeared even to my own judgment, utterly unreasonable. So I kept silence, and the days went by, and it came to the last night before I left Mr. Crosbitt’s house. On that night I had a kind of repetition of the experience I had had in the garden at Granbigh Hall.

My maid had finished brushing my hair and had left the room, and I was sitting by the dressing table,

my eyes fixed upon the flame of my candle, and my thoughts vague and dreamy, when again my consciousness seemed to dwindle and fade, and again the gray mist rose up and blotted out the world and parted and showed me a scene which my physical eyes had never beheld. I saw a small bare room, dimly lighted, scantily furnished, and in the middle of it, sitting writing at a table, Jesse Pimpernel. It was hardly there before it was gone again, and then once more I passed through the veil of gray and came back to normal consciousness. It was very clear, the vision, though it lasted but a moment, and I remembered afterwards, I can remember now, every detail of the room and Jesse's exact attitude. The scene came back to me when I woke in the night, and I wondered if veritably Jesse were sitting in such a room, in such a pose, and if the great Atlantic sea separated me from that which I had seen.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

I ARRIVE AT GLAMARNIE.

It was a tedious journey to Ballarat, the station where I left the train for Glamarnie, and after the railway journey came a long drive of some ten or eleven miles. Very lonely the road was, I thought, and very far off seemed my destination from town or village or any kind of house. I had nobody to speak to, for in consequence of Mrs. Pimpernel's letter I had been obliged to send my maid home again from Mr. Crosbitt's, and the driver, perched up before me, was uncommunicative and seemed in no wise disposed for conversation. Nevertheless I was not unhappy during that drive, or depressed; for now that I was so near the bugbear of my thoughts, it seemed less terrible than I had pictured it at a distance; and then the hills reminded me of Ireland, and the prospect of seeing Beta gave me a thrill of gladness and banished her mother from my mind. At last we came to a gate, and the gate opened into a drive, which, I managed to learn from my surly driver, was the entrance to Glamarnie. It must have been about a mile long and ran between two rows of Scotch firs, which on the one side stood clear against the sky, and on the other were backed by a thickly grown covert. The drive wound gradually upwards, and the carriage moved slowly, so that I began to

wonder when I should reach the house. At last I saw it, a gray square building, two storeys in height and somewhat grim in aspect. It stood on a sort of mound, bare in front, but with trees and undergrowth at the farther side and covering the raised ground at the back; and encircling the whole of this mound,—as I found afterwards, for the approach to the house showed only part of it,—was a moat, wide and deep, crossed by a wooden bridge. In the centre of the bridge, was a gate, or rather a door, for it was made of solid beams which left no aperture, and this gate, as I soon learned, was locked every evening at sunset. Just now it stood open, and presently we had crossed the bridge and a space of small loose stones, and had drawn up before the door of the house. A servant whom I did not know came in answer to my knock, and showed me into a room—the drawing-room, as I supposed—where, almost immediately Mrs. Pimpernel appeared. She greeted me with a great show of cordiality, but evidently felt, as I felt, that the situation was an awkward one, and I think we were both glad when Beta came in. Beta's manner, like her mother's, was somewhat constrained, I thought, and she hardly seemed so pleased to see me as I had expected she would be.

“You will like to go to your room, Hester,” Mrs. Pimpernel said presently; “or will you have tea first? It is just coming in.”

“I will have tea first, please,” I said.

I was, indeed, both cold and hungry after my long drive, and I thought, too, that if I went to my room after tea, Beta would come with me and we could have a long talk. But after tea it was Mrs. Pimpernel herself who played the part of conductor.

"Aren't you coming?" I said to Beta.

Her mother answered for her. "Beta has something to do for me just now."

My room was at the side of the house, on the ground floor, and there was nothing to be seen from the window but thick shrubbery and the upper part of the tall hills beyond. Mrs. Pimpernel led the way, and when I had followed her into the room she turned back and shut the door.

"I am glad to have you in my house again, Hester," she said in her pompous way.

"Thank you," I replied hesitatingly, for I knew that I was anything but glad to be there. I hope we shall be friends again now," she went on.

"I should be glad to be friends with you on Beta's account," I answered.

"You cannot, of course, be friends with her without being friends with me."

"Not at present, I suppose."

She took my meaning at once. "Beta's future is entirely in my hands. She does not marry if scandal attaches to her name."

"All the more reason to change it," I said with that unfortunate flippancy which from time to time came over me in the presence of Mrs. Pimpernel.

She went on without heeding me. "If you bring scandal upon us, you ruin her chance of happiness."

"Why should I bring scandal upon you?" I enquired.

"Why indeed, when all might go well without it?" she replied enigmatically. "But you did once."

"It wasn't *my* fault. Jesse should have left me alone."

"Jesse loves you," she said. If her glance could

have spoken, it would have added: "And *I* hate you."

There was a hardly perceptible space of silence, and then she came close to me and put a hand on each of my shoulders; the heaviness of the pressure made me feel as if I must sink under its weight.

"Jesse loves you," she repeated. "If you would believe it and would trust your heart, you could be very happy with him."

Having spoken, she released me, turned away, and walked out of the room with her usual measured step, closing the door behind her.

I sat down on the chair nearest at hand in a state of bewilderment. Such a strange beginning to my visit as this, I had never imagined, and I could not get over Mrs. Pimpernel's extraordinary conversation. Was she acting as ambassador for her son? Had I been induced to come to this far place to be plied with protestations and arguments on behalf of Jesse? and did she imagine that anything of the kind could have the smallest effect upon me? Looking back now, I believe that she found it difficult to realise the possibility of resisting Jesse's fascinations; I believe she honestly thought—up to that time, at any rate—that if I could be persuaded out of the idea that he had tried to injure me, I could not but consent to give him myself and all that I possessed; and knowing the exigencies of his position, she was ready to bury her dislike of me in her desire to save him, salving her conscience in regard to her dead friend, by the argument that I should be happy enough in the end. I believe all this now, and, by the light of after events, I understand her strong desire to persuade me to Jesse's will; but at the time I was thoroughly bewildered, and I sat for fully half

an hour, wondering what it all meant. I wondered too, why Beta did not come to me; she could surely have nothing to do that would keep her away after being separated from me for months. She did not come, however; the only person who came near me was the servant who had opened the door and who said that Mrs. Pimpernel had sent her to ask if she could help me with my unpacking. I had not liked the woman's face from the first, and I declined her offer, saying that I could quite well do all that was necessary. When I had unpacked and had written to Mrs. Sullivan to tell her of my safe arrival, it was getting on for seven o'clock, and I dressed for dinner before finding my way back to the drawing-room.

"You seem to have all new servants," I said to Mrs. Pimpernel, for, as I passed the dining-room, I had seen a man whom I did not know engaged in laying the table.

"Yes, I thought I would take the opportunity of coming over here to make a thorough change."

"I'm sorry," I said; and I was, for I had been on good terms with the servants at Regent's Gate and should have been glad of the sight of their friendly faces.

The conversation at dinner did not run easily: Mrs. Pimpernel was inclined to be silent and was more jerky than her wont, and Beta was constrained and I could not but think depressed. I was uneasy too at her appearance; her face was thinner, there were deep marks under her eyes, and her hair had lost some of its brightness. But it was her expression which puzzled and distressed me most: the child-like, contented look had gone and was replaced by an anxious, watchful air which was strangely out

of keeping with her natural disposition: I was sure she was unhappy and I longed to know the reason. But all that evening I had no opportunity of learning it. I suggested going out into the garden after dinner, but Mrs. Pimpernel said that Beta had had a cold and must beware of the damp; and all through the hour and a half that we sat upright and uncomfortable in the drawing-room—I horribly conscious of not being engaged upon garments for South Africa—the conversation was, of course, of the most superficial kind only. At bedtime, however, I thought, at bedtime, the long deferred talk would take place, and I looked forward to hearing from Beta all that had happened since we had last met and which had not been communicated in her rare and somewhat stiff letters, and what her prospects were for the future. But again disappointment awaited me, for Beta said good-night to me in the hall and went upstairs with only one quick deprecating glance as she turned away. It was too much for me.

“Aren’t you coming to my room?” I cried.

Her mother answered for her. “Beta is obliged to keep early hours just now.”

“Then I will come to your room, Beta, and stay only till you are in bed.”

Again Mrs. Pimpernel answered. “Beta finds it is better not to talk the last thing at night.”

“At any rate I must see where her room is,” I said, and I brushed past Mrs. Pimpernel’s portly figure which almost blocked the way, and springing up the stairs two steps at a time, overtook Beta as she reached the top. The stairs ended on a landing from which passages branched, right and left.

“Come on!” I said.

“I must wait,” she answered, in a breathless sort of way, “for Mother.”

Her words, her look, her tone, so took me aback that I could answer nothing, and presently, accompanied by both mother and daughter, I found myself walking silently along the passage to the right. Beta’s room was at the very end, looking to the back of the house, with the window, as I afterwards found almost on a level with the ground—though it was on the first floor—owing to the steepness of the rise on which the house was built.

“My room is just opposite,” remarked Mrs. Pimpernel, and then, for the second time, she said good-night, and there was nothing left for me but to find my way downstairs again and back to my own room.

I undressed and made myself ready for sleep, but I did not get into bed; instead, I put on my dressing-gown and sat down and waited till the house was absolutely still. Then, very softly, I opened my door, and stole out of my room and upstairs. I would not be done out of my talk with Beta, I resolved, for I felt convinced that she really wanted to speak to me and that Mrs. Pimpernel for one reason or another wished to prevent our being alone together; and I was determined that my ex-guardian should not have her way. I left my candle on the landing, for I was afraid of the light creeping in under Mrs. Pimpernel’s door, but it sent a faint glimmer along the passage sufficient to guide my steps. In my felt slippers I moved quite noiselessly, and I reached Beta’s door in safety. I put my hand on the handle and turned it—or tried to turn it; but in vain; it hardly moved; the door was locked. Again and again I tried, and still with no success. Did I

make a faint sound in the effort? Did Beta hear me? I couldn't tell, but presently I thought I heard a whisper, and I took my hand from the door and listened intently.

"Go away," it seemed to breathe. "The door is locked——" And then, after a momentary pause: "from the outside."

So it was no use: Beta was locked in. Crest-fallen, alarmed, bewildered, I took my way back to my own room, entered it, locked the door and sat down on the edge of the bed to consider what it all might mean.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TAP ON THE WINDOW.

CONSIDERATION brought me no nearer to a conclusion. Mrs. Pimpernel had evidently decreed that Beta and I were not to meet privately, but what her reasons were for such a decree, I could not know. Ignorance made me suspicious, and I found in her conduct a danger signal. All sorts of fears confronted me, and the sense that I was helpless in this lonely place, cut off from the succour of those who might have helped me, and separated by more than distance from the one man who believed in the reality of my perils, made my heart quail in spite of my efforts to brace it: I don't know how long I sat there on the side of the bed, but at last I told myself that the best thing I could do was to lie down and go to sleep, so as to keep myself, as far as possible, physically well. The long drive in the mountain air had made me more inclined to sleep than I was aware of, and when once I was in bed I was soon on the way to forgetfulness. I don't know whether I had dozed quite off, or whether I had gone no further than that hazy space between sleep and wakefulness, when the consciousness is hardly sufficiently acute to enable one to realise and enjoy to the full the delicious approach of slumber; but suddenly I was wide awake again, my senses on the alert, my hearing, especially,

preternaturally keen. For it was sound which, penetrating to my brain, had roused me so abruptly; sound, not loud, nor continuous, but faint, intermittent, and yet, as I lay and listened, persistently repeated. Soon I gathered what it was—a tapping on the window pane, gentle but distinct. At first fear held me, and I was minded to escape from the room; then, presently, that other side of my nature, the side that fought the coward in me, roused itself and rose up, and gathering up the reins of my impulses, urged me, as a rider urges an unwilling horse, to go and investigate the thing which frightened me. I rose and crossed the room; by the faint light of the night light I could see the curtains flutter slightly in the draught from the faulty window frame, and as I drew nearer, I could hear the soft patter of rain upon the glass. The night had turned sullen, and the wind was sighing pitifully through the trees. “Perhaps,” I thought, “some little branch or twig it is that I hear, driven against the pane by the breeze.”

I pulled aside the curtain, and started and drew back, for no twig or branch was it that disturbed me: close up to the window a figure stood, dim and gray, and made signs to me to let it in. I hesitated. “Hester, Hester!” I heard the voice but faintly, yet I heard; and in an instant the window was open, and the figure came huddling into the room. It was Beta; Beta, with her nightgown covered by a long cloak, her hair damp with the rain, her feet unclad, save for the soft bedroom slippers into which she had thrust them.

I looked at her in a sort of horror. “What does it mean?” I said, “What does it mean, Beta?” For it could only be some desperate cause, I thought,

which could have brought her to me in such a way and at such an hour.

"I had to come—I had to tell you."

I saw now how thin her face had become, and never, never before had I seen that look in Beta's tranquil eyes.

"To tell me what? And how did you get out? You were locked—didn't you tell me?—locked in?"

"Yes, it was the window; I can quite easily reach the ground, you see."

"Oh, Beta! And on such a night! You are cold," I said, and took her hands and chafed them; and indeed she was trembling all over.

"I had to tell you," she repeated, "I had to tell you. Whatever they do or may do to me, I will be loyal to you, Hester. I will not—will not——"

She was so agitated, my poor girl, and so unhappy and so changed, that I forgot my own fears in my concern and pity for her. I took a warm shawl from the wardrobe and wrapped her in it, and I made her sit in the arm-chair and put a blanket about her feet. Then presently, when she was a little less breathless:

"What is it, my dear?" I said. "Tell me, and don't be afraid. I can bear it, whatever it is. We will bear it together, stick close and true to each other, and it is sure to come right in the end."

"Oh," she said, and her wide round eyes grew wider, "it is bad—I don't quite know—but it is bad—bad—and I don't know how to save you."

"To save me! But from what? Beta, dear Beta, try and tell me quite quietly what you mean."

"From Jesse," she whispered. "Jesse is—a devil." Her look as she said the last word, the word

itself, so unlike anything I had ever heard from kind, careless, simple Beta before, struck me with a chill of dread that for a moment paralysed me, and left me staring blankly into her face. Then the necessity for knowing what it was that threatened me, for arranging in some way to flee from or to meet it, spurred my mind to activity.

"But Jesse," I said, "Jesse's in America."

"I'm not sure," she breathed; and then I remembered the crowd in Piccadilly as I had watched it from the hotel window, and the face I thought I had caught a glimpse of in a hansom; and I knew that great evil lay before me.

"Tell me from the very beginning," I said, "tell me from the time you stayed with me. Did you know anything then?"

"Oh, *no*." Her glance was a reproach to me. "I knew only what I told you—that Mother said if you didn't come and stay with us, I should never be allowed to marry Bob; and I never dreamed that Jesse had anything to do with it; I just thought that it was what she said, that the breach between us made a scandal. I would never, never, if I had known, never have asked you to come."

"But Jesse? What had he to do with it?"

"Everything. He arranged it all—everything from the very beginning—our coming over here and your being persuaded to come and stay with us, and the consent to my marriage being put off till I had done all he wanted."

"Has he consented now?"

"Oh, no, and never will. I had a letter."

"From Jesse, do you mean? or from Bob?"

"From Jesse. They have stopped—stopped me writing to Bob."

"How outrageous!" I exclaimed. "Why? What excuse do they give?"

"She says, Mother does, that I don't know my own mind, and that there must be no communication between us, till I am back in London."

"Most men would give the thing up altogether," I said.

"Yes—and I don't know—but I don't think so—only of course Jesse will do his utmost, if I don't——"

"Tell me about the letter," I said.

"It was from Jesse. Mother gave it to me—it was enclosed in one of hers. It was such a cruel letter, Hester." Beta looked more like herself as she finished the sentence, for the tears came into her eyes and hid the strained, frightened look in them.

"Go on," I said. "Tell me what he said."

"He said that I was in his power, that he could stop my marriage easily, and would, if I did not obey him in everything, and that if I did not do just as I was told, if I turned against him and betrayed him, there would be such a scandal, that no decent man would have anything to say to me."

"But what did he want you to do?"

"I don't know—I don't know what he means in the end, but I was to do just what Mother told me, and I know that they mean I am to tell you nothing of what I suspect or know, nothing that goes on. I don't know much—it's kept from me; but they don't trust me and they are afraid of my speaking to you, of warning you, and that's why I'm not allowed to be alone with you."

"What do you suspect? What do you know?" I asked breathlessly. I was kneeling in front of

Beta; my hands were on hers as they lay upon her lap; our eyes met in a direct intensity of gaze.

"I suspect he's not far away; I *know* he's not in America."

"How—how?"

"Mother left the letter for a minute on the table—it was at breakfast, and she was called away. I saw there was only a penny stamp on it, and then I looked at the postmark."

"Well?"

"It was London."

"He never went," I said with conviction.

"No. I'm sure of it. Then I tried to warn you, I tried to write, but I knew that for a long time Mother had never let my letters go without seeing them."

"You might have sealed them."

"The sealed ones never went at all. And over here I had no chance of ever getting out to post them. I believe they came so far away to cut me off from everything."

"And to cut *me* off."

"Yes."

"And your mother?"

"I can't make her out. She's afraid, I believe; and sometimes at night I can hear her in her room, sort of moaning, and talking to herself it seems like. But in the daytime she's cold and silent, and keeps me working harder than ever at those missionary things."

The rain was heavier now; we could hear it distinctly against the window, and the rising wind spoke with a note of warning.

"We must send a telegram," I said.

"To whom?"

"To Bobby."

"They won't let you."

"Whom do you mean by they?"

"Mother, and that new maid of hers, Manningby. One of them will be always with us."

"Somehow I will find a way. After all they can't make me a prisoner."

Beta still looked fixedly at me. "I don't know," she said.

"Not," I declared, "at the very beginning. And, Beta, whatever comes, we will stand together."

"Whatever comes, whatever they do to me, I will be true to you, Hester."

By a common impulse we both rose, feeling that our conference was at an end, and that, for that night there was nothing more to be said or done. Together we went over to the window; I unfastened it, and she stood for a moment on the threshold. It was very dark outside now, and all the foliage was astir with the wind and the pelting rain.

"If we ran away?—now?" I said.

She shook her head. "There is the moat, and the gate is always locked."

She stepped out into the night.

"You will be soaked," I said.

"That's nothing," she answered, "beside the rest."

She disappeared in the darkness, and I, very gently, shut to the window and shivering, crept into bed, and lay pondering till, with the dawn, came a ray of courage and of hope, and I fell into an uneasy sleep.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MRS. PIMPERNEL'S MANŒUVRES.

It would be no more difficult, I had reflected, during those wakeful hours in the night, to send Captain Bobby a letter than a telegram, and the first thing I did when I woke in the morning was to write to him.

“DEAR CAPTAIN LOCKWOOD,” I wrote,—“Do you remember our conversation at Fielding’s Hotel? The time has come to prove your loyalty. Beta is a prisoner in her mother’s house, watched, frightened, unhappy, and there is worse before her. If you love her, and do not want to lose her for ever, you must come and take her away by force or stratagem. Come to the hotel at Ballarat—call yourself Mr. Roberts, and wait till you hear from me. If you get this (for I may be prevented posting it) telegraph to me: Cousin very ill; going North Wales; and sign it Loveday. You may think me mad, but I implore you to come on the off chance of my being sane; and whatever you do, don’t write to me.
HESTER WYNNE.”

I addressed and sealed this letter and put it in my pocket before going in to breakfast. The writing it had made me late—not for breakfast, but for

prayers, and I stood outside the dining-room door and listened to my ex-guardian's toneless voice as she went through her usual formulas: for the Mrs. Pimpernel of Glamarnie was, as far as outward religious observances were concerned, the Mrs. Pimpernel whom I had known for so many years at Regent's Gate; and when I entered the room, she gave me the same reproving glance, and I was oppressed by the same feeling of guilt, as on like occasions in the bygone London days. I could hardly have believed the truth of all Beta had told me, I could hardly have credited that the scene of the night had been actual and not a dream as I looked at my godmother's pompous, impassive face, had it not been for Beta herself. But Beta was the nervous, constrained, strangely-mannered girl who had so startled me on my arrival the day before, and I knew that it was all true, and that there was worse to come. A little scene which occurred after breakfast, confirmed my fears. I had stepped out into the garden, for the sun was shining, and the air after the rain was wonderfully pure and sweet; and I suppose that Mrs. Pimpernel, whose back was to the window, had not heard me come in again, for she did not break off from what she was saying as I entered.

"Mind," I heard her decree, "no secret conversations and gossiping to-day."

"It is so long since Hester and I have met, Mother," Beta ventured timidly.

"Girls ought to have nothing to say but what their elders may hear. And you must mind your manner, Beta; that hangdog, sullen way you have taken to is a thing I won't have."

"I can't help it." The words were almost whispered. "I'm not good at pretending."

"Pretending! What have you to pretend? I have said that I will not have you corrupted by the influence of Hester Wynne, and you must do as I say and do it cheerfully. Now go!"

Beta rose, and I took advantage of the slight noise she made in doing so, to retreat out of the window again.

I went straight to my room and put my hat on; the posting of that letter was the first thing I had to do; and I thought I would slip out of the house while Mrs. Pimpernel was engaged with her house-keeping. But just as I reached the front door she called to me.

"Where are you going, Hester?"

I turned round; she was standing at the top of the stairs.

"I'm going for a stroll," I answered.

She came on down the stairs. "Oh, don't do that. I want so much to show you through the house and all about the place. I shall be ready in a quarter of an hour."

"I should like a brisk walk first," I said, "if you don't mind. I'll go out on the road a bit and come back." If I could only get started, I thought, nothing else mattered; I should have no hesitation in staying out all morning if necessary; and if I could just manage to post the letter, it wouldn't matter how angry Mrs. Pimpernel was afterwards. But she would not give in.

"The roads will be wet after the rain," she said. "You will do much better to wait till the afternoon, and then Beta might go with you. She knows all the roads; the walk to Ardvalloch is a very pretty one and you would enjoy it much more if she were with you."

I distrusted her, but I felt there was nothing more to be said, and I came back into the hall.

"I will come for you to the drawing-room," said my godmother. "You will find the magazines for the month there, and perhaps you may have some letters to write."

I went into the drawing-room and wrote a letter to Mrs. Sullivan. It was as easy to post two letters as one, and I would tell her the truth while I could. I had almost finished when Mrs. Pimpernel came in. She must have entered very softly, for I did not know she was there till I heard her voice just behind me.

"You are writing, Hester?"

"Yes, to Mrs. Sullivan," I answered, for I knew she had read the address on the envelope.

"I will take the letter and have it posted."

"No, thank you," I returned. "I will post it myself this afternoon at Ardvalloch."

"You may miss the post if you wait till the afternoon, and it is a very long way to go. Perhaps you may not feel inclined for such a distance."

"Oh, I'm sure I shall; and I like an object in a walk, so I would rather take it."

I put the letter into my pocket as I spoke, and Mrs. Pimpernel said nothing more, except that she would be back shortly.

I sat for a long time with the *Sunday at Home* open before me; quite alone, for Beta did not come near me; and it was within an hour of lunch time when Mrs. Pimpernel at last returned. I felt that my whole morning had been purposely wasted, but I knew that my best policy was to show no sign of suspicion or annoyance, and I agreed with alacrity to her invitation to take me through the house.

Afterwards I was very glad I had gone, for my observation during the inspection stood me later on in good stead. At the back of the dining-room was a small room which Mrs. Pimpernel used as her boudoir. Rather gloomy it was, for the shrubs came within a few feet of the window, but my god-mother, as I knew, was not sensitive to atmosphere.

"Is that a cupboard?" I asked, pointing to a door, the upper part of which was of thickened glass.

"Yes," she answered, "a china and store cupboard, quite a large place. I haven't the key with me just now, or I would show it to you."

Upstairs, as I have said, a passage ran to right and left of the landing; to the right were Beta's room, her mother's and two others; to the left were the servants' quarters. Beyond Beta's room, approached by a downward flight of three or four steps, which I had not noticed the night before, was a sort of *annexe*, built out over the stable and consisting of one small room.

"Rather a cold dreary little place," Mrs. Pimpernel remarked. "We never use it."

"Well you don't need it," I said.

"No, we have plenty of room without, now that we are so small a party."

I knew what her words implied—that I had driven Jesse away, but after what Beta had told me, I felt only angry that she should dare to reproach me with his absence.

Immediately after luncheon I announced my intention of getting ready for my walk. "And *you* are to go too," I said to Beta.

She glanced from me to her mother with doubtful eyes.

"If you feel able for it," said Mrs. Pimpernel.

"Oh, quite, I—I'll go and get ready"; and with surprise in her voice and on her face, Beta left the room and hurried upstairs.

I put on my hat and a little thin coat, for it was not warm enough to go out without extra covering, and went into the hall to wait.

The time went on and Beta did not come. I became impatient and then anxious, and was about to go up to her room when Mrs. Pimpernel appeared.

"Beta is so sorry," she said, "but she has been seized with an attack of faintness and will not be able to accompany you."

"Oh, let me go to her," I exclaimed.

"No, she is better to be quite quiet. You had better let me send your letter to the post after all."

"Not at all," I replied. "I shall go for my walk all the same, though I shall have to go alone."

"You must not go alone. If you insist upon going, Manningby will go with you."

"It's quite unnecessary. I am quite able to take care of myself."

"You may think so, but while you are under my care, I refuse to let you tramp about the country unprotected."

I was very angry, angry at having my movements fettered, angry with myself for not having persisted in my intention of going in the morning, and I came perilously near to showing what I felt. But discretion came to my aid in time; it was better to keep the buttons on the foils as long as possible; and Manningby could not possibly prevent me from posting my letters, I reflected. "All right," I said carelessly.

It was about ten minutes later when at last I set out, burdened by the company of the maid. I had

taken a dislike to her from the very first, and she did not improve upon acquaintance.

"Shall I walk behind you or beside you, Miss?" she said in a tiresome, servile kind of way as we started from the front door.

"Whichever you prefer," I answered. "I don't care in the least."

She fell a few inches behind me, to one side, where I could just catch sight of her out of the corner of my eye. It worried me to see her there, especially as I felt she was studying me intently.

"Oh, please come forward," I said, "by my side."

She obeyed, and we walked on side by side for about a mile; then she began to lag.

"Please, Miss, would you mind not walking quite so fast?" she said. "I have rather a tender foot."

"You needn't come faster than you like," I replied. "I'll go on at my own pace, and if you can't keep up with me, I'll meet you on the way back."

She quickened her steps. "Mrs. Pimpernel said I was to attend you, Miss."

"I will settle it with Mrs. Pimpernel."

But she hurried on by my side till presently we came to where a sort of cart track branched off from the road.

"This is the way, Miss," she said, turning into it.

"That? The road to Ardvalloch? Why it's hardly a road at all. And besides I know that the main road leads nowhere else, so you must be wrong."

"It's a shorter way, Miss, a much shorter way."

I thoroughly distrusted her.

"I don't like short cuts," I said, and marched on. She followed me, and for some way we proceeded in silence. The road wound in and out amongst the

hills, which rose in interminable succession one beyond the other. I knew it was a long walk upon which I had set out, a distance of many miles, a distance which was really beyond my strength; but I was determined to compass it, and I pressed on as fast as possible, feeling that if I could once reach the village and post my letters, it would not matter how tired I should feel on the homeward way, nor how slowly I went. Bend after bend of the road was turned, and I was beginning to think that surely there could not be very much further to go, when I was brought to a standstill by Manningby.

"Oh, Miss, please, Miss," she said, "do stop. I feel so bad."

I'm afraid there was not much sympathy in my voice. "What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, so faint and bad I feel, Miss. I can't ever get no further."

"Well, stay here and rest till I come back; or you can be turning homewards and I will overtake you."

"I daren't, Miss. My orders was to attend you, and Missis is so particular."

"I've told you I'll make it all right with your mistress. Here, sit down on this stone. I *must* go on."

I turned on my heel to leave her, but I had not gone a couple of yards before she called after me.

"Oh, Miss, don't leave me, Miss! I'm sure I shall faint here by the roadside. Oh dear, oh dear!"

I turned back feeling a strong desire to shake her, and she immediately began a fearful moaning and groaning.

"Oh, I do feel so bad! I feel like as if I was

at death's door. For 'Eaven's sake, Miss, don't leave me!"

"What's the matter?" I asked again.

"Such a 'orrible pain, Miss, through the very middle of my 'eart. Oh, Miss, I shall fall, I do believe I shall fall."

She staggered, and involuntarily, I put out my hand to help her. She clutched at it and leaned her whole weight on my arm.

"I shan't never get back if you don't assist me," she whined.

"All right, I'll assist you," I said, "but you must wait here till I come back. It's absolutely necessary for me to go on."

Immediately she began her old cry. "Don't leave me, don't leave me, Miss! I know I shall die, if you do."

What could I do? I was all but convinced that she was shamming; yet I could not leave her moaning and groaning upon the road; not to speak of the fact that she held my arm as in a vice, and that she was a tall big woman and I was small and slight. I reflected; evidently she had had her orders; in any case I was not to go to Ardvalloch that afternoon; and if all other methods failed she would prevent me by sheer physical force. It was wiser to avoid an open contest; it was safer to pretend I believed her.

"We will go home," I said. "You can take my arm."

She limped along by my side, leaning a considerable portion of her weight upon me; she was a big woman, as I have said, and it was no easy task to support her, and after a time I came to the conclusion that to act as her walking-stick was an aggravation of my discomfiture which it was un-

necessary to bear. I kept up the fiction of her illness, though.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I am really not strong enough to help you any further. If you can't walk alone, you must wait here and I will send a vehicle for you when I reach home."

"I think I can get along now, Miss," she replied. "I'll do my best any hows."

She released my arm and fell a little to the rear and we walked the rest of the way in silence. What a long way it seemed! and how disappointment and vexation hung upon my steps and robbed my limbs of their energy! I felt as if I could hardly drag one leg before the other when at last the gate leading to Glamarnie came in sight. As we climbed the drive I spoke to Manningby.

"I hope you feel better," I said.

"Yes, Miss, thank you, Miss, I feel pretty well all right again," she answered.

At the front door we encountered my godmother.

"You are back in good time," she remarked.

"Manningby was taken ill and we had to turn," I said.

"What about your letter then?"

"Oh, the letter must wait till to-morrow."

I went to my room and tore what I had written to Mrs. Sullivan into tiny pieces: but the letter to Captain Bobby I kept all evening in the bosom of my frock.

CHAPTER XL.

I WRITE LETTERS.

MRS. PIMPERNEL had outwitted me so far, but I was determined not to be beaten.

“I will fight you with your own weapons,” I said to myself, as I looked at her across the dinner table; and all the evening as we sat at work in the drawing-room—for, unable any longer to endure that uncanny atmosphere in idleness, I had volunteered to help with a petticoat—I was considering what I would do.

As we lighted our candles in the hall, Beta managed to whisper to me: “Not to-night”; and I knew that that meant she had nothing more to tell me, or that it would not be safe to risk a stolen visit. I did not therefore sit up waiting for her, but undressed at once and got into bed. Did I sleep that night? Yes, reader, I did, and soundly. I was tired with my long walk; the mountain air was strong; and I had had but little rest the night before and a great deal of agitation throughout the last twenty-four hours. So I slept—a dreamless, delightful sleep; and when I awoke, the sunlight was bright in the room, and I rose refreshed, strengthened, and invigorated, my nerves braced, my courage revived, prepared to meet and cope with the difficulties before me. It may seem strange that throughout this

time when the perils which menaced me were worse than any I had yet met with, I should have been less timid and nervous, more self-possessed, clearer in judgment and stronger of heart than at the very beginning of my troubles when the danger was less and I was not even sure that my fears were well founded. But I think the very indefiniteness of the dread of those first days, the absence of any apparent cause for what happened, the suggestion of supernatural agencies which Jesse had contrived to convey to me, all tended to confuse and unnerve me; whereas now my knowledge of the foes I had to deal with set all my faculties on the alert, convincing me that only by meeting cunning with cunning could I attempt to deal with them. I do not say that there were not times when courage seemed to leave me altogether, when my heart sank and my head swam with intensity of fear; but in the main I was able to keep my presence of mind, able to plan and to act, and the very desperateness of my circumstances enabled me in some strange way to fight them.

After breakfast I went into the drawing-room and wrote to Mrs. Loveday. I told her that I was staying with Mrs. Pimpernel and Beta, that I was having a delightful time, that the scenery was magnificent, and that I felt much the better already, of the bracing mountain air. I had gone for a long walk the day before, I said, and had intended it to be still longer, but had been obliged to turn owing to the illness of my companion; for which I confessed myself secretly glad, as the distance I had intended to go was really beyond my strength, though pride would not have allowed me to shorten it. The only drawback to my enjoyment, I stated, was that Beta seemed far from strong and that Mrs. Pimpernel was

evidently anxious about her ; but I ended by saying that I hoped she would soon be better and that we should be able to have some rambles together amongst the hills. I finished the letter and addressed the envelope and waited till my godmother should appear, which I knew she would do before long, to see what I was about. Then I rose, and saying something about stamps, went out of the room, leaving the letter and envelope side by side on the writing-table. I remained away a sufficient length of time to enable her to read the letter, and then returned with stamps and the petticoat. Mrs. Pimpernel met me at the drawing-room door.

"Have you many letters?" she asked. "I am going to send in to Ballarat this morning, and Bracewell can take them."

"No," I answered, "I've only one. I've been writing to Mrs. Loveday."

"And Mrs. Sullivan's letter?" she said.

"Oh," I returned carelessly, "I tore that up. I thought I'd write another to-day, but now I think I'll wait till I hear from her. I'm sure to hear to-morrow."

"Well, put what you have on the hall table," she said and passed on.

I went into the drawing-room again, fetched my letter and inserted the enclosure which I had ready in my pocket. Only a half sheet of note paper it was, for I had torn off the blank half sheet of Captain Bobby's letter, not daring to risk a perceptible increase of bulk. For the same reason I had to do without an envelope, but I had affixed to his half sheet a minute piece of paper on which I had written his name and address, and underneath, directions to forward it at once. It took me hardly more than

a quarter of a minute to put Mrs. Loveday's letter, with the enclosure, into the already directed envelope, to close and stamp it and lay it on the hall table. I made as much haste as possible, so as to avoid any cause of suspicion, and then I returned to the drawing-room and began to sew diligently. Some slight risk I supposed I ran in what I had done, but so slight as to be well worth attempting; for Mrs. Pimpernel, having read the letter, would be hardly likely to reopen it, as the feel of the envelope gave no indication of the extra contents; and it would suit her well that so glowing an account of my visit should go forth into the outer world. But it might be some time before Captain Bobby received my communication. His movements were uncertain, I knew, and Mrs. Loveday, too, was travelling about from place to place and might not get my letter for several days. Delay meant increased danger for me, increased suffering for Beta, and now I should have to live in a state of suspense till I knew whether my plan had been successful. Still, I hoped; and hope gave me strength to go on, to affect light-heartedness, to think out possibilities of escape. It was impossible to make definite plans, seeing that I did not know yet exactly what threatened me, what precisely the danger was with which I had to contend: one thing only I resolved—that I would not escape alone; Beta should come with me, or I would stay with Beta.

Dear, unhappy Beta! How miserable it made me to see her so changed and broken, with that strained frightened look in the eyes that should have been calm and soft; and how strange it was to be in the same house with her, seeing her constantly, and yet to have no real intercourse with her, to be

allowed no sort of communication! For so it was. If we went out together Manningby or Mrs. Pimpernel went with us, and in the house I had given up attempting to see her alone, knowing that if I succeeded, she would have to suffer in consequence. We were indeed, both of us, prisoners, but the time had not yet come to show that I was conscious of the fact.

The day after I sent away—as I trusted—my letter to Captain Bobby, I heard from Mrs. Sullivan. But what did she mean? “We are glad to hear from Mrs. Pimpernel of your safe arrival, but a little surprised and disappointed that there is no word from yourself.” I had written to her within a couple of hours after entering Glamarnie and before I had begun to suspect that evil was intended towards me. Had even *that* letter been stopped? Then I remembered a sentence at the end of it, and understood. “Don’t be surprised,” I had written in a half joking mood, “if I should write and ask you to make some pretext for summoning me suddenly, for I’m not at all sure that I like or trust my hostess any more than I did.” That sentence had caused the destruction of my letter, and that no letter entered or left the house without inspection, I was now convinced. This one from Mrs. Sullivan had been handed to me without being tampered with; but then Mrs. Pimpernel would know of course that as the writer had not heard from me since my arrival at Glamarnie, it could not contain anything that mattered.

“A strange thing,” I remarked when I had finished my reflections. “Mrs. Sullivan says she has had no letter from me, and I wrote the very day I arrived.”

"The posts are very uncertain," Mrs. Pimpernel replied. "A good many letters have gone wrong."

"Very unsatisfactory," I said, and did not further pursue the subject. It was a gain, at any rate, to know something of my enemy's tactics.

CHAPTER XLI.

I GO TO CHURCH.

THE next day was Sunday. I had supposed that we should be confined to the house and grounds as usual, but to my surprise Mrs. Pimpernel directed Beta and me to be ready to start for church by ten o'clock. My spirits rose; perhaps I should have an opportunity of posting a letter, or of communicating in some way or other with the outside world. But reflection showed me the unlikelihood of anything of the kind; guarded and watched as I should be, what could I possibly do? Still I should see people, be in the company of my fellows, and there was no knowing what opportunities of help might arise. I had not very much time in which to get ready, but I hastened to scribble a note to Mrs. Sullivan; somewhat incoherent, I fear, but setting forth as shortly as possible, the situation I was in. There was but small likelihood of my being able to post it, but I would not run the risk of losing even the remotest chance.

When it was time to start, I found that my god-mother intended to stay at home. She had a headache, she said, and did not feel well enough to go. We set out; I sat in the front of the dog-cart with Bracewell, a man who seemed to combine the duties of coachman and butler, and Beta was behind with

Manningby. We were to go to Ardvalloch, which, I had now found out, was two miles further away than Ballarat. I could not, of course, speak to Beta, except by uttering the merest commonplaces, and to while away the time and keep myself from dwelling too intently on the hazards of my situation, I addressed a few remarks to Bracewell. He was an intelligent man, with a very pleasant manner, and told me several superstitions connected with the mountains, which he had picked up since being in the neighbourhood. I became interested in what he told me, and then I ceased to follow his words, my whole attention being concentrated upon an idea which had occurred to me. The idea was this: could I trust him? could I dare to confide to him the posting of my letter? Reason told me it was impossible that all Mrs. Pimpernel's servants should be in league with her against me; intuition directed me to keep my secret to myself; the two fought within me, and I did not know which to follow. Then, all at once, the sun came out and made everything seem more hopeful; the speculative part of me came into play and urged me to a course which meant betrayal or salvation; I said to myself that I should have no chance of escape if I gave way to a morbid distrust of everybody I came across, and I made up my mind to run the risk.

"Bracewell," I said in a low tone, "I have a letter I want you to post for me."

He gave me a quick glance, and I felt half inclined to draw back. But my voice, I reflected, had probably startled him, for I was aware of the agitation in it; and indeed all my life my voice has been somewhat of a trial to me. I can control my face if hard put to it, my temper, my manner even; but

it has often been impossible to me entirely to prevent my inmost feelings from creeping into my voice, and probably in this instance my emotion had betrayed itself in the usual way.

"I don't know as I shall be near a post office, Miss," Bracewell said.

"But you will be putting up the horse?"

"Yes, but——"

"You can't be *very* far away from one." I took a sovereign from my purse and held it out to him.

"Quite unnecessary, Miss," he said. "I shall be happy to post your letter."

I put the sovereign into his hand nevertheless, with the letter. "And—and you needn't say anything about it," I added.

"No, Miss, certainly not, if you don't wish it."

He put the money in his pocket, and presently pointed out to me a mountain which he said was called the Devil's Watch Tower. "Curious names they have in these parts, Miss," he remarked.

His manner was admirably respectful and pleasant; and yet—and yet, I did not feel quite comfortable. "Hester Wynne," I said to myself sternly, "you are an undecided fool. You do a thing and then repent of it. For goodness' sake don't look back from every plough you put your hand to, or you will never succeed in what you want to do!"

We were close to Ardvulloch now, and presently I found myself seated in the little plain church, Manningby next to me and then Beta. It occurred to me to wonder what would be the result if I were to rise up and ask all the people there to help me. Had we evidence enough, Beta and I, to prove my fears well founded, or should I simply be accounted mad? I was considering this when I had the first

of two surprises which happened to me on that day. Glancing round the church, my eyes encountered a well-known face—the face of Mrs. Brabrook. My first impulse was to get up and go straight to her, to implore her aid and protection; but I must wait, I knew, till the end of the service, and forced myself to stay where I was. How long the time seemed, how wearisome the sermon, how tiresome the hymns! At last it was over, but Manningby must have seen that I was anxious to hurry out of church, for nothing would induce her to stir till the congregation should all have departed.

“Missis always waits till the last,” was all she would say in answer to my impatient remonstrances. At last I could stand it no longer; the desire to get out overwhelmed every other consideration, and almost without thinking what I was doing, I stood up on the seat, put my hands on the back of the pew and vaulted over it into the next one. I did not heed Manningby’s exclamation, I did not pause to see if anybody had observed and been shocked by my manœuvre; I made straight for the church door, and I ran, I think, down the path through the churchyard. Mrs. Brabrook was standing by the gate.

“Hester,” she exclaimed in her sternest tones, “that is not the way to come out of church.”

“Oh, I was afraid,” I gasped, “afraid you would have gone.”

“I saw you, and was waiting for you. You should try and be more seemly in your behaviour. Remember the day and the——”

“I am a prisoner,” I broke in, “watched, prevented——” I stopped short for there was Manningby beside me.

"Miss Wynne," she began, "I don't know what Mrs. Pimpernel——"

"I am speaking to this lady," I said. "Go on!"

"I can't go on without you, Miss."

There was an impertinence in her look and voice which did more for me, I believe, with Mrs. Brabrook than anything which I myself could have said.

"Where are you staying, Hester?" asked Mrs. Brabrook.

"At Glamarnie," I answered, "between this and Ballarat. Do come to me!"

Beta had been standing a few paces away; she now came forward. "Yes, do come!" she said in a low voice and without any attempt at a conventional greeting.

Mrs. Brabrook gave a slight start. "Miss Pimpernel!" she exclaimed, and then added, "Have you been ill?"

"Young ladies," said Manningby, "the carriage is waiting."

"You had better go," said Mrs. Brabrook. "I will see you again."

We shook hands in silence, and followed Manningby down the path.

It was then that I had my second surprise of that day; for loitering about in the road, amongst a group of idlers, I saw another face I knew, the face of the man whom John and I had surprised at Granbigh Hold, and who had travelled in the train with me from London.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE SMALL BARE ROOM.

OF course Manningby reported what had taken place as soon as we got back. I knew that, although Mrs. Pimpernel made no reference to it, not even when I stated at luncheon that Mrs. Brabrook had been in church.

"Indeed!" she replied. "Is she staying in the neighbourhood?"

"I suppose so," I said, but did not add that she was coming to see me. Of that, Mrs. Pimpernel was aware already I knew, and would use her knowledge to prevent my seeing the visitor when she came. When would that be? and was she staying alone at Ardvalloch, or was John with her? The uncertainty gave me plenty to think about, and I thought a great deal as I sat with "The Sins of Self-confidence," which my godmother had recommended as a suitable work for Sunday afternoon, open before me. I sat and thought till I saw Mrs. Pimpernel's eyelids droop and her head fall forward, and then I stole out of the room. I had had no opportunity of surveying the moat, and was anxious to find out whether at any point it presented a possibility of escape. I thought that at this hour Bracewell would be safe indoors and that I should be able to make my inspection unobserved, but, as I

passed round the corner of the house I met him. He looked at me somewhat sharply, and I thought my best plan was to address him, showing nothing of the suspicions which I could not help feeling.

"Did you post my letter, Bracewell?" I enquired.

"Letter quite safe, Miss," he replied. "Going for a walk, Miss?" he added.

"Only just round about, inside the moat," I answered; but I noticed that when I had passed on, he went over to the bridge and shut and locked the gate. I went on, slowly till I was out of his sight, then with quickened steps, round by the bank of the moat; but found no comfort as I went, for everywhere it was equally wide and deep. I followed it till I had seen all that could not be seen from the garden, and then, partially retracing my steps, climbed the little hill at the back of the house, and came down through the trees and undergrowth towards the garden. I faced thus, that part of the house in which was Beta's window and also the window of the *annexe*, and standing on the higher ground, I commanded the rooms within. I could not see into Beta's room, on account of the blind which covered the upper part of the window, but that other room, with its undraped casement, was open to my gaze; and it entered and was fixed there, fascinated by what it met. For that room in the *annexe*, small, bare, and scantily furnished, was the room I had seen in my vision the night before coming to Glamarnie, the same in every detail. It was empty; that was the only difference; but I said to myself: "He will be there before long."

I went indoors again with a sort of sick feeling which I could not overcome for the rest of that day;

and when night came I lay awake and thought of the many things that combined to strengthen my dread. That room, made known to me by my strange prevision of it, before ever I had seen it with my mortal eyes, was one; another was the discovery that Manningby and Bracewell were the only two servants at Glamarnie. This fact, communicated to me that same evening in a moment's chance interview with Beta, was ominous, and made me more than ever doubtful of my wisdom in entrusting my letter to Bracewell. Well, I was soon to know the fate of that letter, and a great deal more besides; for on the morrow Mrs. Pimpernel and I came into open conflict.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE DREAD DRAWS NEARER.

My wakeful night had resulted in the determination to make another effort to reach Ardvalloch. Mrs. Brabrook might not pay her promised visit for a day or two, and it was necessary, absolutely necessary, to seek help from the outside world without delay. The bridge gate was kept locked all the morning, so it was useless to attempt to carry out my plan till the afternoon; but after lunch Bracewell generally went to the stable, which was outside the moat, to see to the horses, and while he was there the gate was left open. I must wait then for this, my only opportunity, and accordingly as soon as lunch was over I went to my room and got ready, meaning to make my exit through the window. I opened it and stepped softly outside on to the drive, but no sooner had I done so than Mrs. Pimpernel emerged from the front door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm going out."

"What for?"

"For a walk."

"You cannot go for a walk to-day."

"Why not?"

"I have my reasons for forbidding it."

"And I have my reasons for disobeying you."

"You cannot go, Hester."

Then I cast prudence to the wind. "Am I a prisoner in this place?" I said.

She looked at me for a full minute very steadily; her face changed and I saw the truth in her eyes; then at last she spoke with her lips: "Yes."

"I refuse to be made a prisoner," I said. "I mean to go now, and go I will."

"No!" she answered, "it is impossible."

"Do you mean that you will prevent me by force?"

She did not answer, but her glance went beyond me, and I turned and saw Bracewell on the bridge.

"Are your servants your tools?" I asked scornfully.

"They will do my bidding," she replied.

"Well," I said, "we'll finish this conversation without their assistance. Go on, and I'll follow you."

She withdrew from the door and led the way across the hall into the room which she kept for her own use, the room at the back of the dining-room, and I followed her and closed the door.

"Now!" I said.

For a moment she appeared to falter—only for a moment; almost at once she regained her self-possession; imperious and arrogant she stood before me, the guardian of my early days, the woman I had always feared, albeit now and again some odd contradiction of my nature had aroused in her presence an almost irresistible flippancy. But I was not flippant now; it was war to the knife I knew, and the old shrinking was upon me in spite of my determination to be brave.

"Hester Wynne," she began, "you call your-

self a prisoner; but how can you expect to be treated when you behave like *this?*” She threw down a letter on the table.

“Ah,” I said, “so that’s what Bracewell did with it! He should not have taken my sovereign though.”

“Bracewell knows his duty.”

“Bracewell,” I said, urged by some strange impulse to defy and taunt her, though all the time my knees were trembling under me, “Bracewell is worthy of his mistress, worthy of her son, worthy of the son’s intrigues and the mother’s religion.”

A red flush crossed her sallow face, and for a moment I thought she would have struck me. But she did not strike me—not then.

“You have been the cause of it all,” she said hoarsely, “you whom I brought up with all the care I could give you, whom I endeavoured to lead in the right way, whose soul I tried, yes truly and honestly tried to save. You were never dear to me; your whole character, your stubborn ungrateful nature, your very look and face were repugnant to me. And yet I did my best, I did my duty by you; I did, I did, Hester Wynne, whatever you may say.”

“Yes,” I said, drawing away from her, for the sound of her voice frightened me, “till Jesse came home.”

“Till Jesse came home.” She drew a long gasping breath after repeating my words. “Do you think it was nothing to me to see Jesse—who was bound to me by my very heart strings, who was more to me than all the world besides, who had been away from me for years and years, who came back to me troubled and miserable—do you think it was

nothing to me to see him take up with *you*? and to see you scorn him?"

"Not me," I put in, "the money he wanted from me, the jewels he tried to steal."

"Yes, you," she persisted, "nevertheless you. And if you had done what most women would have done, if you had given up your airs and graces and let your heart go out to him, all this would have been saved, all this trouble and misery. He would not have been driven desperate, and I should not have sinned."

"Strange," I said, "to blame me for what you and he have done."

"Not strange, but just; for you might have saved him."

She stood looking at me for a moment in silence; then:

"Let me go away now," I said in a low voice, "let me go right away before you do what you have in your mind, and all the rest shall be forgotten. I promise you on my honour, not a soul shall know of it."

Would she yield? Oh, I had never known how much I feared, how I longed for escape, till now! No; her face darkened.

"Do you think I would sacrifice Jesse to you—now—after all this? No. You shall not go till you have done his will."

The words struck cold upon my heart. What was his will? and how would she enforce it?

"Is this," I said, my voice shaking in spite of myself, "the way you keep my mother's trust?"

All at once her composure deserted her; she clutched at and leaned upon the table; her face grew white. Her eyes looked beyond me; it was as

though she did not know I was there; and then suddenly she turned her gaze full upon me and spoke in a fierce, harsh tone.

"Did you know she came to me last night?" she asked, "came and upbraided me——" Her voice changed again. "It was a dream of course, a nightmare. Don't suppose that I believe in such things. Susan knows that I did my best for you, did my best till—— Oh," she cried, "is it wonderful that I should hate you, seeing what you have brought me to?"

I heard the last words dimly, as in a dream, for my whole attention was concentrated upon another sound—the sound of wheels on the drive. At once I gathered what it meant; Mrs. Brabrook had come and might be turned away before I had the chance of seeing her. I sprang to the door, and at the same instant Mrs. Pimpernel became alive to what was happening. Her hand was on my shoulder.

"No," she said, "no."

I turned and wrenched myself from her grasp, prepared at all costs to make a fight for freedom. For a moment we faced one another. "Oh, I know how you hate me," I said, "but——"

The door opened and Manningby entered the room.

"A note for Miss Wynne," she said, but she handed the note to Mrs. Pimpernel. My godmother opened and read it, while I looked on powerless and indignant, and Manningby glanced from one of us to the other. Presently she handed the letter on to me, with what sounded like a sigh of relief.

"Not to-day at any rate," she said.

I read the letter with a sinking of the heart. It was from Mrs. Brabrook. She had intended to

come and see me to-day, she said, but had caught a chill the day before and was laid up in bed. She would be glad if I would come to see her, but if I could not, she would come as soon as she was better. A lady staying in the hotel was kindly leaving the note in the course of her drive and would bring back an answer.

I looked at Mrs. Pimpernel when I had finished reading.

“I will speak to the lady,” I said boldly.

She gave me an odd look. “Will she ever give way?” she murmured, “or——” Then in her usual tones. “I will see the lady and tell her that it is not possible for you to go to Ardvalloch during the next few days.”

She went out of the room, leaving Manningby to guard me, and presently I heard the wheels on the drive again, retreating—retreating. Then I sank into a chair, and covered my face with my hands. But I did not cry.

CHAPTER XLIV.

I AM AFRAID.

THAT evening after dinner I said to Beta: "Your mother tells me I am a prisoner."

I had an idea of remaining in my own room, of refusing to come to meals or to have any intercourse with Mrs. Pimpernel, but reflection showed me that I should gain nothing by such a course, that I should only curtail still further my opportunities for observation and—possibly—escape, and that the best thing I could do was to go on as usual. I did not work, though, at the South African petticoat that evening; I sat with my hands idle before me and looked into the fire—a peat fire like the one at Shirdallagh in which I had sought to read futurity. What different scenes this one painted for me! Mrs. Pimpernel was hard at work as was her wont (I believe she must have had an idea of smothering her conscience with under-garments) and she did not pause when I spoke. Beta looked at me in tremulous dismay.

"A prisoner?" she faltered.

"Yes," I replied, "the murder's out," and I thought my godmother started as I said the words, "and we need none of us pretend any more."

Beta looked from me to Mrs. Pimpernel and back again to me, but did not speak.

"I don't know," I said, and my voice began to tremble in spite of me, "I don't know what I have done to be made a prisoner, nor what is going to happen next."

It may be that in my face and in my voice I showed the fear against which I struggled, but which was fast taking possession of me; but at this point Beta burst into tears.

"Oh, Hester," she cried, "oh, Hester! and it was I who brought you here!"

"Not knowing," I said, and I got up and went over to her and kneeled down beside her; somehow the touch of her was a comfort. "Not knowing at all what was to come of it."

"No, indeed, no indeed." She could only sob for awhile, and Mrs. Pimpernel worked on steadily, taking no notice, save for a side glance now and again.

"I wanted to tell you this," I went on, "before your mother, and to tell your mother before you that I hope your sufferings are now over. You have done your part—the part of a decoy——"

"Oh, Hester, Hester," she put in, "if I had only known—guessed—suspected!"

"—and there is no reason why you should be made miserable any more."

She threw her arms about my neck. "Oh, you don't know," she gasped, "you don't know."

"I know nothing," I said, "except the way in which your mother has kept her faith with mine."

I knew that my mother's name was like a sword-thrust to Mrs. Pimpernel, and I knew that with a nature like hers, to wound was probably to increase my danger: but the very hopelessness of my position

gave me a sort of courage, the very fear that shook me urged me to defiance.

She rose, my godmother, at these last words of mine.

"Enough of this," she said. "You are hysterical enough already, Beta, without Hester's morbid extravagances to excite you. You had better go to your room."

"Yes, go," I echoed, "go, dear Beta, and don't worry about me. I am only glad that pretence has been dropped at last, and that I know where I am."

I led her to the door, and I smiled as I held it open for her to pass through, for I could not bear the anguish in her eyes, and for the moment I thought only of how to comfort her. I closed the door behind her and turned to Mrs. Pimpernel.

"But after all," I said, "I don't really know. Tell me. Tell me what you are going to do to Susan Grant's child."

"Not her child," she said in an odd toneless sort of voice, "not really her child. No likeness—none at all—between the two."

"Except the hair," I answered. "Have you forgotten?"

She waited, with that strange look of the afternoon again upon her face.

"No, no, no," she said at last. "I do right and not wrong, good and not evil. It will be for your good in the end, Hester, for your happiness, and your children's, if—if——"

"If what?" I asked.

She did not answer my question.

"It will be for your good," she repeated. She raised her right hand with one of her uncouth ges-

tures. "I call God to witness that I believe it to be for your good."

"I should advise you," I said, "to leave God out of this business."

At my words a curious change came over her; the exaltation left her face and she was once again the imperious self-contained woman that I knew.

"You are right," she said in her usual voice. "Between you and me there should and shall be only command and obedience."

"Obedience cannot be enforced."

"Submission then," she substituted.

"Nor submission." I don't know what induced me to defy her, but defiance was strong in me. I let my gaze meet hers. "You *can't* subdue me," I said.

At that her voice and manner changed again.

"If I could," she muttered, "if I only could—we should all be saved."

Somehow these last words of hers frightened me more than anything she had yet said; they seemed to carry with them a sense of inevitable doom; and in silence I turned from her and passed out of the room. Dread was heavy upon me as I locked my door, and I told myself that I must fight it or it would overwhelm me: fear, I said, ceases to be fearful, if one grapples with it. But there are depths of fear to which at that time I had not reached. Well, I was to learn something of them that night.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE TERROR BY NIGHT.

I LOCKED my door and sat down in the arm-chair and thought. I held my fear at arm's length; I would not make clear to myself what I dreaded. My chief thought just then was of Beta; this present life, I felt, would kill her or drive her insane if it continued, and at all costs she must escape from it. There had been barely time yet for Captain Bobby to get my letter; but as soon as he did, as soon as I heard from him, as soon as I knew that Beta could count upon a protector, somehow or another she must manage to get away from Glamarnie and join him. I was sorry that I had told him in my letter to wait till he heard from me, sorry that I had not told him to come openly and rescue us both at once; but at the time of writing I had not known how desperate was the situation, and had strongly desired, for Beta's sake, to prevent an open scandal. I could make no fresh plans, though, without consulting with her, and I cast about to see how this could be accomplished. All through the day, I knew, a meeting would be impossible, but the following night, by hook or by crook, I must go to her room or she must come to mine. I would go to hers, I resolved, for strained as were the nerves of both of us at this time, mine I thought were

the steadier. I would write her a little note telling her to be prepared for me, and slip it into her hand in the morning. I got up and wrote the note, and then it occurred to me that, as I had broken my journey on the way, I did not know how long it took to come direct from London to Ballarat. It was important that I should know this, so that if I received the longed-for telegram I should be able to calculate when Captain Bobby was likely to arrive; and I made up my mind to go and consult a time-table which I had observed that day on the drawing-room table. It was an effort to me to leave my room and go out into the unprotected space of that uncanny house; but it must be done, I decided after a little wavering, and after all I ran no real risk. It was unlikely that my movements would be heard, and even if they were, and I were discovered, it would not greatly matter, seeing that my action that night required no co-operation on the part of Beta. It was the next night's plans which it would be hazardous to carry out, for to involve Beta any further in my misfortunes was what I particularly wished to avoid, and except for her own sake, would have run no risk in which she was obliged to take a part. Nevertheless I felt strangely reluctant to leave the shelter of my room with its locked door; the events of the day had affected me more even than I was aware of at the time, and the sense of evil lay heavy upon me. But I overcame the reluctance, I stifled the dread, and taking a candle in my hand I carefully opened my door and stole noiselessly across the hall to the drawing-room. There was the time-table, just where I remembered seeing it; I took it up and began to consult its pages, for it would not do to carry it off with me, lest its absence

should be noticed before I had an opportunity of putting it back in the morning. I stood by the table, my candle flickering; I remember that the wick was too long, and that the shaky uncertain light bothered me as I searched the thin, closely figured pages. I stood and sought anxiously the information I wanted; and standing there, I heard, all at once, and distinctly, a slow footfall on the stair. Not loud was it; it would hardly have caught any ears, I think, whose hearing was less nervously acute than mine; but certain; and deliberate. Who was coming? The old sick sense of dread was upon me. Did I know? Ay, in my soul I knew; but my mind still asked my heart: Who is it? Immediately, without waiting a tithe of the time that it has taken me to write this down, I blew out the candle; and then—or I fancied it—the footfall slightly quickened. I did not move; my hands rested upon the table; and fear—oh, such a fear—was upon me, as I waited while the footfall reached the hall and crossed it. It entered the room and paused. The silence was absolute, as absolute as the darkness, save for one faint sound which was borne to me through the oppression of it—the sound of slightly quickened breathing. For some time—or was it only a second?—there was no other; then came movement; it—he—that unseen presence was coming towards me. As it advanced I retreated, feeling my way by the table; and ever the movements grew more audible and ever those groping hands drew nearer to me; and ever and anon there was a pause, and in the pause I heard again the breathing, and *felt* the approach of the evil: but no word was spoken. So we went on, round by the table's rim, pursuer and pursued, and the slow caution of that silent race

was worse a thousandfold than any effort of speed. If I could only get near the door, was my unformulated hope; but I had lost my bearings, and knew not where I was. Then at the last I stumbled up against something—a chair, I think; and then I stood still, for the dread held me. Quite still I stood till a match was struck, and the candle relighted, and I found myself face to face with Jesse Pimpernel. I had known whom I was going to see, but I think I must have partly forgotten the terror of his face, or else now, for the first time, the full evil of his soul stood revealed in it. I neither stirred nor spoke, and he for a while did not speak: he only smiled. I cannot attempt to describe that smile, but as I met it, I seemed to know for the first time what fear really was. And then I saw a strange thing; behind Jesse's face, some few yards behind it, I saw another face, perfectly white, like the face of a corpse, and with wide strained eyes. I did not know it for my own face reflected in the mirror, I did not realise what it was till I and it moved; for it bore no likeness to the face my glass had hitherto held up to me as my own. I moved at last, when Jesse spoke.

“Little Hester,” he said; and then I shrank back a step; involuntarily, for I knew that as soon as I stirred, he would stretch out his arm and touch me.

And so it was; he put his hand on mine. “You would not give me your hand when we said good-bye. Never mind. There will be no more good-byes between you and me.”

I did not attempt to speak, and I made no resistance when he led me to a chair, and put me into it: I made no effort to escape when he kneeled down before me and put his hands upon my knees, and looked at me, his face close, quite close to mine.

"And now," he said, "little Hester, what have you to say?"

I found my voice then—at least a voice uttered itself, a firm distinct voice, which must have been mine, though it sounded in some odd way, a long way off; and I spoke, and must have spoken consciously, though it seemed to me that until I heard the words, I did not know what I was going to say. I made what afterwards seemed to me a curious answer to his question. I asked another question.

"Was it you in Ireland?" I said.

"Yes."

"That evening in the garden?"

"Yes."

"And on the lawn in the night?"

"So you saw me! Yes."

"Did you come to try and rob me?"

"Yes."

"Of the locket?"

He nodded. "To see if such a thing would be possible."

"The boys," I said, and such a strange little sob rose suddenly in my throat and broke my speech; "the boys protected me."

"At the time," he answered.

"And in London?" I went on, still in that dream-like way, the foreground of my consciousness dimmed I suppose by fear, and the background seeming to hold but one idea—the wish to have the past made clear.

"In London what?" asked Jesse.

"It was still you?"

"Who played at ghosts and gave you brain fever? Yes, it was I, always I; except twice, when it was Mother."

"And in Derbyshire?"

"Still I."

"And at Granbigh Hold—after—you had said good-bye?"

"Of course. And always, directly or indirectly, you thwarted me. It would have been well for you if you had let me have my way."

"Did you go to America?" that me within the conscious me still questioned.

He seemed to take a sort of pleasure in answering me. "No, but I should have gone, if I had got the jewels that night. And you would have escaped *this*."

I held my breath.

"And what," I said after a pause, during which neither of us moved, "is *this*?"

"Can't you guess? you of the seeing eyes and the intuitions. Can't you guess, little Hester?"

I would not meet the question, for now the whole of my consciousness was becoming acute, and the thing I feared was too dread to acknowledge.

"I know," I answered, "that I have been lured here, and trapped and held a prisoner."

"Yes," he said, "and then?"

I could only repeat his words: "And then?"

He paused, and often now in my dreams I see his face as it looked at that moment.

"I said I would woo you no more," he said at last; "nor will I; the time for soft ways and speech is over. And yet, little Hester, I will have you for my wife."

"No," my lips said, "no."

"Do you think you can escape me? Not so. It is marriage or murder now, my dear, and marriage suits me best."

I cannot tell you how those words affected me, those two words, "my dear"; but a rush of fierce hatred and horror filled the whole of me, and I pushed his face away with convulsive hands, crying: "No, and again no. Kill me if you will, but I will kill myself, sooner than do your will."

He was so much stronger than I was, and in a minute he had mastered my hands, and held them prisoners in his; and then—and then his face touched mine and he kissed me. I don't know what I did; I think I spat at him; but I know I heard him laugh; and his next words held me very still.

"I will smother you with kisses," he whispered close to my ear, "if you move."

"And now," he went on presently, "now to business. If I killed you I should get—through Mother—a third of your fortune: if I marry you I get that and more—enough to do—well what the jewels would have enabled me to do, and to live free of care for the rest of my life."

"I will make over to you," I breathed, "all that I have, the jewels and all, if——"

"Yes, and have me run in when you were free. No, no, little Hester. And besides, I want you; I want to break your spirit and to do away with that pride of yours."

In spite of the fear and the danger, a sort of defiance came over me, and knowing myself absolutely in his power, knowing that he could do no more than his worst, I let it loose.

"You may break my heart," I said, "and destroy my body, but you cannot touch me—me, the spirit of me. I can and shall always despise you."

But I had not known the worst.

"Can't I touch you?" He waited. "Look

here," he said; "if I kill you, before I kill you, I will drive you mad with terror."

Suddenly and while I looked at him, he had horribly distorted his face; madness, real or simulated was in his eyes; wickedness such as I had never dreamed of, possessed his countenance. All my life I had had a horror of anything ugly, abnormal, grotesque; as a child grimacing had always set me shrieking; and he knew, Jesse knew, as he managed to know most things about me, just how most surely to terrify me. As I saw that face, close to me, working, mowing, gibing, my self-control left me, and my terror uttered itself in a scream. Only the one, for his hand was on my mouth.

"Enough," he said, "just to show you what you defy. And now, good-night."

He led me, I think, as far as my room, led me perhaps to my bedside. I can't say, for I remember nothing clearly till I found myself alone, lying on my bed, and saying over and over again: "Help me, God! help me, God! help me!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

I MAKE PLANS.

WHEN I awoke the next morning—for I slept, after a while, that night, slept soundly and continuously—I suppose because I was quite worn out—my first thought was the thought of Jesse's face; my second was how, by any means whatsoever, I could escape from the horror of it. I had spoken truly when I said that I would kill myself sooner than submit to his will; but he might, when the worst came to the worst, prevent my destroying myself, might first—I shrank from imagining all that he might do, and all the while imagination suggested to me possibilities of suffering such as had never dawned on me till last night. I rose and dressed, shuddering as the thought crossed me: Was he in the house now? and how long had he been there unknown to me, watching me, perhaps, biding his time?

I managed to slip my note into Beta's hand, and I made some poor effort at maintaining my composure during breakfast, more for the sake of my own self-esteem, I think, than with any idea of keeping up a show of courage before Mrs. Pimpernel; and when we rose from the table, I followed my godmother into her private room, the room behind the dining-room, and said in as smooth a voice as I could muster that I wished to speak to her.

"There is but one communication," she answered,, "that can make any difference now—that you have repented of your girlish pride and folly and are prepared to marry the man who loves you."

I thought of that scene, in the night, and the grotesqueness of her words touched something in me that sent forth an odd sound—I don't know now whether it was a sob or a laugh; and that was all the answer I made her.

"Hester," she said, speaking more quickly than was her wont, "you *must* marry him."

"Did he tell you," I asked, "about—last night?"

She nodded, and repeated her former words: "You *must* marry him."

"Or he will kill me."

At my words her composure deserted her and she gave a sort of cry. "Hester, Hester, Hester, he must not kill you; you must not let him kill you."

"I would rather that than marry him," I said.

"No, no, no, it must not be. You would be happy, Hester; I am his mother and I know; he would be good to you."

Jesse good! I shuddered, and as I thought of the face that haunted me I threw myself at her feet.

"Oh, help me!" I cried. All my scorn and defiance had gone; I was helpless, broken, terrified; I thought only that here was a woman who had been young once, as I was young, had been my mother's friend, and would make an effort, surely, surely, to save me. "Oh, if you knew," I said, "if you had been there last night, if you had seen——"

"If you would submit to him," she answered, and her voice trembled more I think than mine, "if you would go his way, he would be kind—he was before—he used to me—I remember—Oh, it is you,

you," she broke out, and pushed me from her as I knelt, "who have changed him."

I rose to my feet. "If it is money," I said; "if he is in need, trouble, danger——"

"Danger! Oh," she interrupted, "yes, till he is away from this place and land."

"In danger from the want of it, he shall have all I have, all I can give to him—money—the jewels—all, if you will only save me and let me go."

"I can't. Only by your death, or by marriage——"

"But surely," I broke in, "what belongs to me, what is mine absolutely, the jewels and that thirteen thousand pounds that I can do as I like with, surely I can give them, make a deed, a contract, a—there must be a way."

I knew very little about law, reader, but it seemed to me that it must be possible to give away one's possessions if one wanted to, and I would have given every half-penny I possessed to escape from Jesse Pimpernel.

"No, no," she murmured, "and I cannot risk it, I could not be sure, and my first duty is to him. I can risk nothing—I must save him at all costs."

"Let me write to Mr. Crosbitt," I said, "and ask if there is a way."

Something of Mrs. Pimpernel's usual manner came back to her. "Write to Mr. Crosbitt! Are you mad?"

"I would say nothing but that. You should see the letter. It would be only on business."

"I can't risk it—because of the time. It would be—I know—but the time—and besides——"

"But if he kills me!" I said.

Her face paled and she looked at me strangely

and in silence. Then she spoke, but not to me. "If I risk my own soul," she said, "shall I stop for *her*? No." She paused, and after a space—of reflection was it, or struggle?—repeated that last word: "No." Then, urged by what impulse, I know not, she struck me with her open hand across the face, and went out of the room and left me.

In the night, very late, or rather in the early morning when it was drawing on towards the dawn, I crept forth from my window and stole round to the back of the house. As I turned the corner I stopped short, for in the window of the *annexe* a light was burning. I had to pass this window, and fear leaped up in me. But while I hesitated, reason recovered itself and told me that only through sound was I in danger; outside in the darkness I was invisible. I crept on. Beta's casement was ajar, and I did not even give a tap upon the glass before pushing it open, so afraid was I of making any sound which might be overheard; she would be awaiting me, I knew. It was dark in the room and I heard nothing as I clambered in.

"Are you there?" I whispered.

A whisper answered me. "Who is it?"

"Hester."

Then I heard her moving towards me, and presently she took my hand and led me to the bed: we both sat down, side by side, on the edge of it.

"I dared not speak," she said. "Jesse came once—like that."

"Then you knew he was here."

"I have known for days. I hardly knew whether or not to tell you. But I hear that you have seen him."

"Yes," I said, and then we were both silent, for we felt, and in some dumb way agreed, that it was impossible to speak of Jesse.

"Beta," I said presently, "I may have Bobby's telegram any day now. As soon as it comes you must go."

"But how?"

"You must swim the moat. You can swim, thank Heaven. I can't: so you must go alone."

"But I cannot—I will not leave you, Hester."

"My only chance is for you to leave me and get help; and indeed, whether we hear or not, it will be better for you to make the attempt to-morrow night. If we hear, you must go to Ballarat, where he will be; if not, to Ardvulloch to Mrs. Brabrook."

"And when—at what hour?"

"Early, as soon as the house is still. No—stay—there is a moon. We must wait till it sets; about this hour, about three."

"And if we fail? if Jesse——"

"We must not fail," I said. "And now, I had better go."

But Beta held me. "Do you know——?" she asked. All the time we had spoken in whispers, but now her voice was so low that I could only just catch her words.

"What Jesse means to do?" I answered. "Yes, he means to force me to marry him."

"And—and——"

"And anything else? Surely that is bad enough," I answered, for I did not want to frighten her more than I could help. "I know everything," I went on, "for he told me himself; I know the very worst; you need not be afraid."

Then I kissed her, groped my way very carefully to the window, which showed now faint signs of the dawn, and lowered myself to the ground. The light was out in Jesse's room, but it was with a quaking heart nevertheless that I rounded the corner of the house and found my way back to bed.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE CUPBOARD WITH THE GLASS DOOR.

THE very next morning the telegram came. Mrs. Pimpernel of course opened it, but when she saw the apparent harmlessness of the contents she handed it on to me. It was worded according to my instructions: *Cousin very ill. Going North Wales;* but there was an addition: *Starting morning train.* It was signed of course, Loveday. I felt the blood rush to my face as I read it, but Mrs. Pimpernel, I fancy, thought that my emotion was caused by disappointment and that I had expected some other communication. She made no remark, however, and indeed the household at that time was for the most part a silent one. At lunch, I broke the silence by saying to Beta: "I have had a telegram from Mrs. Loveday."

"Oh," said Beta nervously.

"Yes. Her cousin is ill and she started this morning to go to her."

"Is it—is it far?" Beta asked.

"She will arrive I should think some time this evening."

It was a puzzle to me that since I had known of Jesse being in the house, he had not openly shown himself, and I began to wonder whether Bracewell and Manningby were aware of his presence. I was

inclined to think they were not, and from what Mrs. Pimpernel had said, it seemed evident that Jesse himself was in some kind of danger. I was in my own room, where I spent now the greater part of my time, pondering over the mystery of it all, when Manningby came with a message from Mrs. Pimpernel to the effect that she wished to see me. I found her in the little room at the back of the dining-room; she was standing by the window and did not look round till some minutes after I had entered. When at last she turned, she spoke hurriedly, though with constant little pauses between the words.

"I have been thinking that if you wrote at once—to the brokers—and told them to sell immediately—for cash—it might be possible—to get the money that way."

"Do you mean——?" I began, hardly daring to hope anything.

"I mean that at the worst—if it came to the very worst, I would save you"; and as if to herself, she added: "and him."

"Save me you mean from——"

"Yes." We neither of us said the word that was in our minds.

"Help me to escape?"

She bent her head, and then: "The post goes soon," she said.

I sat down and wrote, at her dictation, a letter to my brokers, asking them to sell immediately, for cash, all the stocks standing in my name, and to send me at once, a cheque for the amount. I knew nothing about business or law or anything of the kind, but I was willing to do anything, attempt anything, on the bare chance of escaping from the horror of falling into Jesse's hands.

I had just finished the letter and Mrs. Pimpernel had closed and stamped it, when again, as two days before, I heard wheels and horses' hoofs upon the bridge. My godmother heard them too, and I knew, as for one swift instant our eyes met, that the thought which had arisen in my mind was also in hers. We both stood motionless and waited till Manningby appeared, the expected words on her lips. "Mrs. Brabrook has called and wants to see Miss Wynne."

"Miss Wynne is not in."

"So I said, and she said she would see *you*."

"Tell her I am not well and can see nobody to-day; that Miss Wynne will write."

In two minutes Manningby was back. "She says she must either see you or wait till Miss Wynne comes in."

Mrs. Pimpernel hesitated and her brow grew black.

"I suppose it would not do," she said at last; "it would excite—— No, I shall have to see her. Take her into the drawing-room, but first——"

In an instant she had seized my arm, dragged me across the room, and almost before I could attempt even to withstand her, I found myself pushed into the china cupboard, and the door shut and locked behind me.

"If you scream or call," my godmother's voice said, "Jesse will come"; and then indistinctly, through the panes of thickened glass which formed the upper part of the door, I saw her leave the room.

It was nearly dark in the cupboard, or seemed so after the full day from which I had been exiled, for very little light came in through the thick coloured glass; and for a minute or so it was altogether

still: then, quite close to me, as it seemed, I heard the sound of voices. Whence did they come? My eyes were growing accustomed to the gloom now, and I was able to take my bearings. The cupboard was large and lofty, more like a room, in fact, than a cupboard; one side and end of it were fitted with wide shelves, and the standing space was thus reduced to a passage between these shelves and the length of bare wall which faced them. It was from the other side of this wall that the voices came, and as I reflected upon the position of my prison, I realised that it was the wall which ran along the end of the drawing-room. But how could I hear so well? The wall must be unusually thin, or—— Sight was coming dimly to my aid now, and I could indistinctly see and, by passing my hand along the wall's surface, distinctly feel, a door about the middle of its length. It was papered over on the further side, and in the drawing-room there was no sign of it; but it was easy to understand now how I heard so distinctly, for the woodwork had shrunk and left a space, in which I could insert a finger, between the door and its frame. Standing close to it, I had no difficulty in hearing what was said, and I had no scruples about listening; for the voices which spoke were the voices of my godmother and Mrs. Bra-brook. But I had no sooner settled myself to listen than an idea occurred to me. I carried a pair of pocket scissors; and with these scissors I bored a hole in the paper which, in the space between the door and its frame, was all that stood between me and the speakers. Thus I could see as well as hear, and throughout the scene which followed, I was as much present as if I had been actually in the room with the actors in it.

"I will wait till Hester comes in," Mrs. Brabrook was saying.

I could see that Mrs. Pimpernel was disturbed, I who knew the signs of her face so well; but she maintained her impassive demeanour.

"I am afraid she may be very late," she answered. "She has gone a long distance."

"Still I will wait."

"It is just possible that—that she may not return to-night at all. Her friends whom she has gone to visit may keep her. Another day perhaps—if you would come back——"

"If I go away without seeing Hester Wynne," Mrs. Brabrook said, "I shall not come back alone."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Pimpernel asked, startled but imperious.

"That I am not satisfied."

"As to what?"

Both women had risen, and again I was struck by the contrast between them; the one slight and thin, yet with a distinct presence, the other, self-confident indeed, but ponderous and awkward.

"As to Hester's position here."

"Her position! And what do you suppose her position to be?"

"I am not sure—I will not lie or fence or beat about the bush with you—I am not sure that Hester is a free agent here!"

"You insult me," Mrs. Pimpernel cried. "Hester shall come and see you as soon as she returns. But for the present I must beg you to leave my house."

"I will leave it," the other replied, "but—I will return."

Oh, how I longed to warn her, to stop her saying

those words, for she did not know—and indeed how should she?—as I knew, the perils of that house. She moved towards the door, but Mrs. Pimpernel advanced and barred her way.

“If you will wait a minute,” she said, “I will see if, by any chance, Hester has returned before you go.”

She left the room, and I knew very well that she was going to consult Jesse.

I tried to attract Mrs. Brabrook’s attention; I wanted to say to her: “Go now—before she comes back. Make haste to the carriage and get in and drive away, and save yourself and me!” But she had gone right down to the far end of the long room and was looking out of the window; only by a loud call could I have made her hear me, and that I dared not give. I was beginning to think though, that I would risk it, so perilous did the situation seem to me, when the door opened and Mrs. Pimpernel returned.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ELIZABETH BRABROOK'S TEMPTATION.

I WAS struck at once by my godmother's appearance. She was deadly pale, with the greenish pallor of sallowness, and little beads of moisture stood out upon her forehead; her lips twitched, her eyes, ordinarily dull, were startled and intent, her hands moved nervously. She stood for a minute unable, as it seemed to me, to speak; and through the silence I heard the sound of wheels and of horses' hoofs upon the bridge. Mrs. Brabrook heard them too and started forward.

"What's that?"

"Yes," Mrs. Pimpernel answered slowly, "the carriage has gone. You will have—to stay here."

A little quiver crossed Mrs. Brabrook's face, but she said only one word: "Why?"

"Because," my godmother answered in a low voice, "I dare not let you go."

"Dare not? What do you mean?"

"It would not be safe."

"Do you mean that I, like Hester Wynne, am a prisoner?"

"Why did you come here?" Mrs. Pimpernel asked. Her slow speech left her, and the words poured forth in a torrent; "or, having come, why did you not go away when I gave you the chance?"

why did you insist upon interfering, upon finding out? Why did you not take my word and go away from this house and its doings? I didn't want to hurt you—any more than *her*; and if you hadn't interfered, it would have been all right—in the long run; for Hester Wynne, as for us all; I swear it before God, it would have been all right. But now——” She broke off and threw out her arms and let them fall with a gesture of despair.

Mrs. Brabrook put forth her hand and leaned upon the table. “But now?” she said.

“Now you must stay here, a prisoner, till—it is over.”

“Till what is over?”

“That I cannot tell you. Something that must be done, and done secretly, though afterwards—afterwards it will be, I have always told her so, all right.”

Mrs. Brabrook did not answer at once, but presently she drew a long breath. “So Hester was right,” she said; then, to my godmother: “You may keep me here,” she went on, “but it cannot be for long. To-morrow——”

“To-morrow?” said Mrs. Pimpernel as she paused.

“To-morrow my son arrives at Ardvalloch. If he does not find me there, he will come on.”

“He must not come.”

“He is sure to come.”

“I tell you he must not come. If he comes here——”

“Well?”

“Jesse is desperate. He will stop—at nothing now.”

“My son is no coward, whatever yours may be.”

"Coward!" cried Mrs. Pimpernel. "Ah, you don't know. What does Jesse fear? Nothing—nothing. Not even," she ended in a whisper, "not even God." She twisted her hands together and paced to and fro in the room. Mrs. Brabrook stood quite still and watched her. Suddenly she drew near again and halted.

"All through," she said, "I have tried to avoid—the worst. Do you think I want him stained—my son—with crime? And now, if you will listen to me, if you will do as I say, they may be saved—both your son and mine."

"And Hester? How will you answer to God and her mother, your friend, for her?"

"I will save her; for Susan's sake I will risk what I am risking, to save her."

"What is that?"

"Never mind. Will you listen to me?"

"Go on."

"You must write to your son and tell him not to come; that you are staying here for a week, and then will join him, and that you do not want him to come. It will seem quite natural, for, so that the people at the inn may not have any suspicions as to your safety, I have sent them a note by the coachman asking them to send on your luggage here."

"I will not lie," said Mrs. Brabrook, and the Puritan in her was strong upon her face.

"You will not lie—once, when so much is at stake, when I——"

"Yes, it must be months since you spoke the truth."

I think my godmother scarcely noticed the taunt, so intent was she on persuading the other to her will. She stood for awhile, thinking, thinking, and I

seemed to see the tumult of her soul through her heavy countenance.

"Keep him," she said at last, "keep him away, only for three days. Say whatever you like, only don't let him come. If I had but three days, it might be done."

"I will do nothing, unless I know what you mean to do with Hester Wynne."

"She will be safe. I swear that no violence shall be done her if you will consent."

"She must go away from here."

"I don't know. I will try—at the end."

"I must see and speak to her."

"No, no, it is impossible. Jesse——"

"Then I will do nothing."

"And if harm comes of it, if there should be bloodshed——"

"The blood will be upon your soul in the day when you shall stand up before God and meet the eyes of Susan Wynne, who trusted you."

My godmother shook through her whole ponderous frame, and sank into a chair, her face all drawn and changed.

"She trusted me," she muttered, "Susan, Susan! And *he* trusts me. The two I loved the best, the only two. But he—he is the dearest. No, no, I can't help it; I must be true to him."

So she sat for a while, and the other stood, and it was quite silent. By-and-bye my godmother got up and came close to Mrs. Brabrook and put one hand upon her shoulder. Her back was towards me and I could not see her face now, but I could see that other face, clear cut, stern and passionless.

"I will tell you what we will do," Mrs. Pimpernel said. "Hester shall be saved, and by your son; but

it must not be for three days, till I have time to get a letter that—I expect.”

I knew what she meant—the letter which would hand over to her all that I possessed.

“For Susan’s sake I will do this,” she continued, “and because I dare not risk—never mind, but he must not come here, your son.” She waited, but Mrs. Brabrook never spoke and she went on. “Hester was to have married my son. She shall marry yours.”

Then for the first time Mrs. Brabrook’s face changed; a rush of blood coloured it, and ebbed away and left it pale again; but the lips went on quivering.

“You have wanted this I know,” Mrs. Pimpernel’s voice went on, “and *she* wants it. If you will agree to my plan, this shall be your reward.”

“John will never marry. What you say is useless.”

“I could arrange it. In Scotland marriages—there is a contract—prepared—and Jesse for one day will have to go—I could arrange it and when he was once here, your son, and knew it was the only chance——” She waited while my heart beat five times in my throat.

“You have wanted this so much,” she said in a low voice, “and it would save him. If he lives unmarried, lonely, after you are gone, it is sure to get the better of him, this enemy that you dread.”

I witnessed then a strange and terrible thing, the perfectly silent struggle of a soul in temptation. The face grew paler, that cold, self-mastering face, and the eyes widened; the lips moved slightly, and the breath quickened; otherwise she showed hardly a physical sign of the battle within. And yet I saw it fought, saw it in the still eyes and the tense atti-

tude, felt it in the atmosphere that surrounded her and penetrated to me. She was too clear-headed a woman to be blinded by sophistries, too direct to deceive herself, too simple-minded to allow any mingling of right and wrong. Mrs. Pimpernel watched her.

"You would save him," she murmured, "and it is the only way you will ever get him to do what both you and he want."

She breathed louder now, John's mother, but very slowly. Would she yield? I seemed to know it was the first real temptation that life had ever brought her, the first time that an earthly love had ever tempted her from the rigid performance of duty: and even at the time, even in the midst of my suspense and agony, it struck me as curious that these two women, who in other days had found a bond in the condemnation of the sins of the flesh, should now both reach the direst extremity of temptation through what would be called the purest of all affections, the mother's love for the child.

"I don't see," Elizabeth Brabrook said at last, "how I could be sure that marriage would be inevitable."

"Because once here, escape is impossible without my aid."

"Why should you force a marriage between Hester and my son?"

The struggle still went on; I heard it in the tones of the usually firm voice and saw it in the set face.

"Because then, if she were married, pursuit would be useless—and Susan's eyes—I could meet them. But I must have the letter first."

"To save the girl he loves," I heard John's

mother say, but I think she did not know she spoke aloud, "to save her he would do it."

"It is the only way," urged Mrs. Pimpernel, "to save her and him, and it may be, yourself."

Then Mrs. Brabrook came back to herself.

"Do you think I fear death?" she asked scornfully.

I knew she did not; I knew that for her the great temptation lay, not in the chance of escape, but in the possibility of accomplishing that purpose on which she had set all her hopes and energies; and I knew too that where another woman would not have hesitated, counting the deceit she would have to use as of no account in comparison with the good which would result if she followed the desire of her heart, this woman would make no bargain with circumstance, but count any deviation from what she held to be right a sin. If she yielded now, the fall for her would be as great, as had been Mrs. Pimpernel's when first she agreed to further Jesse's will. There was a minute during which I thought she would yield, during which the human side—call it strength or weakness—the heart in her demanded its desire. She hesitated, but the habit of a lifetime and the bias of her nature reasserted themselves, and she did not yield. The tenseness of her attitude relaxed, her face took its normal lines, and I knew then what she would do. She faced Mrs. Pimpernel.

"I refuse," she said. "Marriage is a holy thing, and I will take no part in a fraud: neither will I lie to save either myself or those dear to me, or to attain my heart's desire. For the rest we are in God's hands, and unless He wills, no evil can befall us."

"Is that your last word?"

"I have nothing more to say."

Slowly my godmother turned and crossed the room. A few paces away she stopped short and started, and then, looking beyond her, I saw a form outside the window, and a face pressed close to the panes,—the face of Jesse Pimpernel. I wondered how long he had been there.

CHAPTER XLIX.

BETA'S FLIGHT.

WHEN Mrs. Pimpernel released me from the cupboard, she led me at once to my own room and locked me in, and there I remained all night, and the greater part of the next day; for the purpose, I suppose, of preventing any communication between me and Mrs. Brabrook. However, I did not much mind, not that evening at least; it was easier to be alone than to bear the strain of my godmother's presence; and after all that I had seen and heard, knowing all that I now knew, the necessity for Beta's flight, the issues that depended upon it, created such a burden of suspense and anxiety as would have made it difficult for me to keep up that outward control of myself which pride urged me to maintain. My heart was sore, though, for the woman whose courage in coming to seek me had brought her into imminent danger, and I would have given much for five minutes in which to thank her, to bid her be of good cheer, to tell her of the hope that lay in Beta's flight. But it was not to be: during the time that Mrs. Brabrook and I were at Glamarnie together, we never met.

Manningby brought me in some food—about nine o'clock I think it was, and then again locked me in, and nobody else came near me that night.

The house was very quiet ; hardly a sound did I hear all through the long hours during which I sat and waited ; but late, between eleven o'clock and midnight, I heard low voices in the hall, Jesse and his mother conferring together after the rest of us were prisoned for the night. Then the voices ceased, and silence held its own. I sat and watched the waxing moon as it climbed slowly down the sky. It was for its setting that I waited, and I dared not lie down upon the bed for fear, though I felt as if I never should sleep again, that sleep nevertheless might overtake me. Midnight struck and one and two o'clock. It was quite dark now, the moon was gone, the dawn was not very far distant ; it was time to go forth and give what aid I could in starting Beta on her way. Very carefully I opened my window and went out into the dark and cold. In my soft felt slippers I could cross the drive and find my way noiselessly to the bridge. Beside it I stood and waited. Was Beta on her way to join me ? Would she be long ? It seemed long, so did suspense lengthen out the moments, but I think I could not have stood more than five minutes there before I caught a white glimmer coming slowly towards me from the corner of the house. " Is it you ? " I asked when it was quite close.

" Yes. Will you take my clothes ? "

She had fastened them together in a bundle, and I took them while she loosed the fastening of her nightdress and let it fall from her to the ground.

I stretched out my hand and touched her as she stood there shivering in her nakedness.

" Good-bye, dear, " I said, " good-bye. "

She stole down the bank to the moat and I heard the sound of her entering the water, and in

the great stillness could follow the strokes of her swimming as she made for the opposite bank. Then at last,—for it seemed such a long, long time,—her voice was at the other side of the bridge gate: “I am here.”

I threw the bundle over to her and waited there while she dressed. Then came her voice again: “I am ready. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye. In a few hours you will be with him.”

I waited till I knew she must be well on her way down the drive, and then I stole back again to my room and to the dread suspense of waiting. If I had known that even then, while the sound of her whispered words was still in my ear, before even she had covered the length of the drive, she had stumbled and fallen and so strained the muscles of her foot that walking was torture; if I had known that not in a few hours would she reach the man who awaited her, but that all the next day in pain and weariness she was to drag herself slowly along the lonely roads till at last she came to her journey's end; if I had known all this, could I have borne the dread hours, the agony of suspense that followed? I cannot say. I thank God now that I was kept in ignorance, that I did not know of Beta's suffering and the futility of the hope I placed on her; for I needed all my strength, all my courage, all my hope for that which was yet to come.

CHAPTER L.

ALONE WITH THE DREAD.

I KNEW the next morning at once when Beta's flight was discovered, knew it by the sound of skurrying feet that rushed hither and thither, of questioning voices, of a general movement and stir in the house; and I knew when my door was unlocked and Mrs. Pimpernel entered the room what she had come to say.

"Hester, do you know of this?" she began.

"Of what?" was all I thought it necessary to answer.

"Of this madness of Beta's, this running away from home?"

Again I answered by a question. "Has she gone?"

"Yes, she's gone, and I believe it's your doing, your plan. Beta would never have thought or dared by herself. Oh, Hester Wynne, all my troubles have come through you; and at this last——" She stopped abruptly and I sat silent and looked at her.

"Did you know of this?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"What use to ask me? You know if I denied it you would not believe what I said."

"Where is she? At least you shall tell me that."

"I can't, for I don't know."

This was true, and truer indeed than I thought, for whereas I supposed she must be now nearing Ardvalloch, she was, as a matter of fact, no great distance away from Glamarnie. Mrs. Pimpernel looked at me intently.

"I believe you know all the same," she said. "But if you will not bend, Hester, there will come a time when you will be broken."

With these words she left me, and I sat and repeated them to myself: "A time when you will be broken." Was the time near? and should I at the last escape it? I had not Mrs. Brabrook's scruples, and though I had told Mrs. Pimpernel no direct lie, during our late interview, I was aware that then, as on many other occasions, I had done my best to deceive her. But would the deceit avail? and would Beta's flight bring rescuers in time? That was the doubt which haunted me; and knowing Jesse Pimpernel, I feared that, with the prospect of discovery imminent, he would certainly take immediate action. Presently I saw him leave the house, much muffled up about the mouth and throat, and with his hat pressed low over his brows. He was no longer in hiding then, I supposed, especially as I saw him meet and speak to Bracewell as he crossed the garden. Well would it have been for him, as I knew afterwards, if he had continued to keep his presence hidden; but Beta's flight had left him no choice; his arrangements had to be made at once, though he risked waiting for the darkness to carry them out.

He had not been long gone when Mrs. Pimpernel again entered my room; she held in her hand a paper.

"There is no time now," she said, "to get that

money. It cannot possibly arrive for another two days; and everything that is to be done, must be done to-day."

"To-day!" I exclaimed, and I know by the feeling at my heart that my face must have turned white.

I think she was glad to see my emotion.

"Yes, to-day," she repeated, "to-day," and then she stood and looked at me in an odd way that somehow frightened me.

"I would leave you to your fate," she said at last, "but for one—for two things; the thought of your mother and the fact that my love for Jesse is greater than my hate for you. So I have brought this," and she held up the paper. "If you will sign this, it will save your life."

A sudden thought came to me.

"If Jesse kills me," I said, "he could never get the money; he would have to fly the country for ever."

"The money does not go to him direct," she answered. "It comes to me. I have but to prove that in all that I did, I was not a free agent—as indeed I have not been—and I have proof that I tried to save you, that I tried all round to prevent bloodshed. I should get your money in the end, and then I could hand it over to him."

I was silent, wondering if it would be so.

"But I would rather," she went on, "keep Jesse from what he means to do, and so I have brought this paper."

"What is it?"

"It is a contract—as we cannot wait for the money to come—a contract to hand over your fortune to Jesse."

I held out my hand.

"Let me read it."

"There is no time to read it. You must sign it at once if you sign at all. See—you have but to write your name here, at the end."

Reader, I knew, as I have said, nothing of law; I thought such a contract as she described might be possible and that it would be binding; and the signing it, she said, would save me. Jesse's words were running in my head: If I kill you, before I kill you, I will drive you mad with terror.

"I will sign," I said.

The paper was folded so that only the first line was uncovered. "We the undersigned do hereby declare," it ran. Mrs. Pimpernel turned the paper over, and I signed, below writing that I could not see, my name. She gave a little sort of gasp when I had done.

"It only remains for Jesse to sign it now."

"Must Jesse sign?"

"Of course. There are always two parties to a contract. Didn't you see that it began with 'We'?"

Somehow as soon as I had signed that paper I felt uneasy, but yet——"

"And now," I said, "you will help me to escape."

"To escape!" She looked at me strangely.

"Hardly. But I have saved your life."

And with that, hastily she crossed the room and left me.

What was to happen then, if I was not to escape? A rush of despair, black and horrible came over me, and then came a sort of weak helpless feeling, and, for the first time since the dread had come close to me, I began to cry. I cried for some time, quite quietly, without sobs or violent agitation, and I

thought of John, and how, if he only knew, he would hasten to come to me; and I thought of the boys, free and happy and careless at Shívdallagh, out spearing perhaps, or shooting on the hills, never dreaming of the peril and the agony that I, their friend and playmate, was enduring. But after a time I pulled myself together. There was hope still. Beta and Captain Bobby would not leave me to perish, and even now there might be signs of their coming. But I was to wait of course, in vain, for that coming, and throughout the day hope was to struggle unfed.

About an hour, I suppose, after Mrs. Pimpernel left me, I saw Jesse return, and almost immediately afterwards, my door was unfastened and I was told to come forth. I was thankful that I had dried my tears and regained my composure, especially when on following Manningby to the room behind the dining-room, I saw both Jesse and his mother awaiting me.

"What are you going to do to me?" I asked.

"For the present, little Hester, just this."

Jesse came forward and seized my arms, and Mrs. Pimpernel held them while he fastened them securely behind my back. I need not describe it all, how I was gagged and made quite helpless: it is enough to say that when the power to speak or to move had been taken from me, I was consigned once more to my prison of the previous day, and once more locked in. Only sight and hearing were left to me now, and sight was useless, and hearing for some time had nothing upon which to exercise itself. But at last I became aware of voices in the drawing-room. They spoke in low tones and as I was some distance from the door which had served me so

well yesterday, I could not hear much of what was said: but now and again I caught words and phrases, and they told me much.

"Bracewell already gone," was the first thing I distinguished and then—it was Jesse's voice that spoke: "I don't like him going . . . quite trust him." After that I lost a good many sentences; the next I heard, I knew referred to me. "Signed it . . . without much difficulty." It was my god-mother speaking; and then came Jesse's laugh, and the words in a louder key: "Ah, little Hester! She doesn't hate me after all so much as she pretends to. Women are all alike." What did he mean? What *could* he mean? but I was too much engaged in listening, to think much about it just then. "In the centre drawer," Mrs. Pimpernel said, "the writing-table."

Listening ever more and more intently, managing somehow to wriggle a little nearer to my spy-hole, I gathered from what I overheard that Mrs. Pimpernel and Manningby were about to take flight, carrying Mrs. Brabrook with them. Jesse was to wait till the evening, till the darkness; it grew dark pretty early now. And I? What was to happen to me? Oh, I knew, I knew, before I heard the words that confirmed my fears:—"come back for her after dark, if they should come, and I should have to hide for a time in the woods."

My hope dwindled lower and lower, for even if the rescuers should come soon, what chance had I to make my presence known to them, gagged and bound as I was? and evidently from what was said, all the doors and windows were to be left open, to show to anybody who might come, at a first glance, that the house was deserted.

The voices had sunk again, but presently I caught broken sentences: "Two that I can trust . . . a carriage . . . Ballarat. . . ."

"But how will they know . . . ?"

"The contract . . . sufficient passport. . . . Not my name, no . . . till the last moment . . . part payment in advance . . . good faith . . . runaway couple. . . ." Those were the last words I heard; but I had heard enough, enough to know that I was to be left in Jesse's power, to do with me as he would.

Very soon the speakers left the room; there were sounds of movement, then wheels on the gravel and across the bridge; and then a deadly stillness; and I knew that in that desolate, far off house, I was alone with Jesse Pimpernel.

CHAPTER LI.

THE SCREAM.

I HAVE often wondered of how many children besides invention, necessity is the mother. Of no other perhaps legitimately, yet has she many bastards, of which courage, I think—a forced, fictitious courage—is one. For, knowing that my case was indeed desperate, that I had only myself to depend on, only my own strength, my own power of resource, my own nerve, a kind of despairing determination began to work within me, and I resolved that until the very last moment I would cling to the skirts of hope, and that I would concentrate my mind, not on the dread possibilities which imagination—ay and knowledge and experience too—held up before me, but upon the endeavour to invent, create or discover some means of escape. The first thing to do, I knew, was to free my hands, but they had been tightly bound, and my arms were stiff already from the unaccustomed position into which they had been forced. Still I must try, and I set myself deliberately to twist and stretch the folds of the scarf which secured them. It seemed impossible, and again and again I paused from sheer exhaustion, and again and again I decided to give up the effort; yet still, urged by some imperative mandate from within, persevered in what seemed a futile

task. Futile it remained for a long, long time; really long, I believe, apart from the laboured drag of those suspense-laden hours; for it was drawing on towards evening when at last I was conscious of some loosening of my bonds. Hope and the triumph of achievement gave me then fresh energy, and I pulled and stretched and twisted till at last, I was able to free one poor bruised, swollen hand. To release the other of course was easy, and easy was it too, to remove the gag which half choked me besides rendering me dumb. At once I drew close to my spy-hole and looked through. At first I thought the drawing-room was empty, so quiet was it; but presently, enlarging the hole slightly, so as to give me a greater range of vision, I saw Jesse seated at one side of the room. I soon perceived why he had chosen his position; his seat commanded the window, and the window, I knew, commanded the bridge. He was waiting then, as I was waiting, with just a strip of paper separating us, and a whole world of difference between our fears and hopes; waiting and watching like me for that which never came.

It was dusk now, and gradually his figure grew dimmer and dimmer in the waning light; and still he never moved. I knew now what I meant to do; but I could not attempt it until he left the room; and if he never did, never till the very latest moment—? I held my thoughts back; I would not let them stray beyond a certain point; for I must keep my reason—at least till despair was absolute. The minutes crept on and on and the night closed about Glamarnie. I knew how the fir trees, gaunt against the sky, would be fading and fading, how the bridge would be blotted out, how the whole world would be one black cloud; and in the midst of it Jesse and

I alone; and everything quite silent, till his voice should speak. Would he never move? Was he still there? Yes, for I felt his presence; yes, for at last he stirred. It was quite dark when he left his seat and broke the spell of stillness which seemed to hold us both. He struck a match and lighted a candle, and going over to the writing-table took from one of the drawers a paper—the same paper I thought, from the look of it, which Mrs. Pimpernel had brought me that morning to sign. He laid it on the table, and then, bearing the candle in his hand, left the room. Now was my time. My pocket knife was open and ready in my hand, the box which I had taken from one of the shelves to enable me to reach the top of the door, stood close beside me. Quickly I passed the blade between the door and its frame; the bolt which fastened the door I had already withdrawn; I had nothing to do but to slit the paper across the top and down one side. It was done, and I had pushed open the door and was in the drawing-room, and even as I passed out I heard the key turned in the lock of the cupboard. I had the presence of mind to push the door to behind me; but I knew that in less than a minute the way of my escape would stand revealed; I had but a few seconds in which to make good my flight. The first beams from the moon had reached the window now, and stealing in showed me how to cross the room, showed me too, the white of the paper lying on the table. As I passed I seized it; without conscious thought, but with a vague sense that it was better not to leave it there. I was across the room now, by the door, and as I opened it I heard Jesse's voice. "Little Hester," it said.

The sound of it gave me strength and gave me

wings : I sped through the hall, out through the open door and across the garden to the bridge. Then a terrible thought came over me—how should I cross it with that locked gate? But the gate was open; the moonlight showed me as much ere I reached it, and no doubt it had been left thus to give greater semblance of truth to the fiction that the house was empty. Across the bridge I flew, my footsteps sounding on the wood, since I could spare no time to soften them, and down the drive between the fir trees, conscious only of the wild mad longing to escape from the horror that was behind me. For Jesse—had he heard me as I crossed the bridge?—Jesse could not be long in any case in discovering my flight; and if he had heard——

Already I seemed to hear in the distance, behind me, footsteps that pursued. Oh God! oh God! If my strength should fail me! and the drive was long, and I dared not turn aside and seek a hiding place. I had no power to think; I could only rush on and on, away from those following steps. I was nearly at the end of the drive, nearly had reached the gate, and somehow greater safety seemed to lie beyond its bars; and then, all of a sudden I was brought up short, and my heart stood still, and the agony of despair fell over me. For out from the bushes sprang a man and seized my arm and held me. His grip was firm, but after a second he nearly let me go again.

“I thought,” he muttered, and then in the moonlight I recognised him; he was the tramp who had come to Granbigh Hold, the man who had travelled north with me from Euston, and whom I had seen loitering outside the church at Ardvalloch.

"Oh, let me pass!" I prayed; "if there is any pity or mercy in you, let me pass!"

"You're his pal," he said, and tightened his grip. "I won't let you go till you tell me where he is."

"Who, who? I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do; the one I was after in Devonshire. I remember you was there."

A light broke in upon me: the visitor,—he had asked that night for the visitor; it was Jesse he had wanted then, not me; it was Jesse he wanted now.

"Where is he? is he at the house?" the man repeated.

I held up my hand. "Listen!" For a couple of seconds we waited and heard the footsteps coming down the drive, and listened to them drawing nearer and nearer.

"He's coming," I whispered, "behind me. He wants to kill me. Let me go!"

Then again I was free, for the time at least, and rushing onward across the patches of moonlight and through the shadows; onward, through the gate, and out on to the road that ran long weary miles to Ardvalloch. But soon in my flight I paused—just after I had passed the gate, paused at the sound of a pistol shot that rang out through the clear stillness of the night and echoing died away amongst the hills; and in the pause my blood ran cold, for a scream went with the shot, a scream that haunts me sometimes still. Then I set out to run again, possessed by the one wild longing to reach some sort of shelter and of help. But I had not gone many paces when round the bend of the road I saw someone coming towards me—the figure of a man. Was he enemy or friend? I stood still and trembled, for fear was strong upon me now and my strength was

failing. I was about to sink to the ground when the figure hastened, ran towards me, and a voice spoke—a voice I knew and loved and longed for.

“Hester, Hester, can that be you?”

And then, with a cry, and with a rush of relief that was pain I fell into John’s arms.

CHAPTER LII.

THE CARRIAGE ON THE ROAD.

BARELY for a minute I rested there. I could not answer his questions, nor ask him any, for the sense of peril was still keen within me, and words that I had overheard that afternoon were vivid in my brain. "Two that I can trust . . . a carriage. . . ." I had not reached safety yet.

It was not till long afterwards that John told me how, having heard from his mother that she was uneasy about me, and having found on his arrival at Ardvalloch that Mrs. Brabrook was at Glamarnie, he had set out at once to see if anything were amiss; never dreaming, as he said, of peril either so great or so imminent, or he would have come as fast as horses could bring him instead of walking, and with a band of rescuers instead of alone. At the time it did not strike me as strange that he should be there; and the sense of peril, as I have said, of necessity for flight, blotted out all other considerations.

"John," I said, "let us get away from here! There is danger."

But when I tried to move I could not stand.

"Oh," I moaned, "I have no more strength."

As I spoke a carriage came rapidly round the bend of the road from Ballarat; it was drawn by a pair of horses; two men were on the box. We were

standing in the shadow of a belt of trees, and I don't know whether the men would have seen us if John had not hailed them. But as soon as he spoke the carriage drew up and one of the men dismounted.

"Are you going to Ardvalloch?" asked John.

"Ay, ay. You'll be the couple——"

At this point the driver touched his fellow on the shoulder, and the two began a whispered conference. At the same time I pulled John by the sleeve.

"I believe," I said, "that this is the carriage that was to take Jesse and me"—I could not help shuddering as I spoke, "to—to wherever he meant to go."

"It shall take me instead," he answered, "as far, at least, as Ardvalloch."

"But you will be careful, for these men—they may be—Jesse—I am afraid."

The driver had got down from the box, and now came towards us.

"Ye'll have the passport, I'm thinking," he said.

Quick as thought I held up the paper I had snatched from the table on my way out. "Yes, here it is."

He was evidently suspicious. "I must see it."

I handed it to him; it was worth a risk, was the chance of being driven those wearisome miles. The man went over to a patch of moonlight, and inspected the paper, the other following him. They turned and twisted it about and presently came back, saying: "It's not filled out; there's only the leddy's name to it."

John had not his mother's stern clinging to the

truth. "There wasn't time," he answered, "before we started. I'll sign it at the journey's end."

"Na, na," the driver persisted. "Ye'll sign it noo, or ye'll no go in yon carriage to Ardvalloch."

"What does it matter whether I sign it there or here?"

"We'll run no risk of losing payment by taking the wrong pairties."

John took a pencil from his pocket, and in the moonlight, wrote his name below mine: then, putting his arm about me, held me, carried me almost, for I was nearly spent, to the carriage.

"And ye declare this woman is your wife," said the man who had first spoken, with his hand upon the door. I felt John's arm tremble, and I heard the tremor in his voice as he answered.

"I declare it."

"And ye'll swear this man's your husband?"

"He is my husband," I murmured, and it was then I think that I fainted, for after that moment when I stood by the carriage door, recollection goes quite away and there comes a blank space. I don't know that I fully recovered consciousness all through that drive, for the memory of it has always remained dim. I have a vague remembrance of driving on and on, knowing in a way that I was safe, and yet with the terror of Jesse, the horror of pursuit still strong upon me; a confused recollection of the carriage stopping (at a hovel about a quarter of a mile before coming to Ardvalloch I found it was afterwards), of seeing fresh horses led out, of hearing John remonstrate, of an altercation, of clamorous voices demanding payment, of the words, "the wrong pairties," of final calm and John getting in

again beside me and our driving on further till we came to the sparse lights of the little town and stopped at last before the inn. I have a dreamlike memory of being lifted out of the carriage, and carried in strong arms through misty space and laid upon a bed; and then again comes the blank of unconsciousness, of a sleep in which there were not even dreams; and I rested at last from the dread which had so long possessed me—the dread of Jesse Pimpernel.

When I came to myself again, the first thing I saw was Beta's face, and I started up, thinking it was surely time for her to set out on her night journey, or that she had been stopped or overtaken and brought back to the terrors of Glamarnie. But when she spoke to me and told me I was safe, I began to remember; and then I found that I was at the inn at Ardvalloch, with friends to protect me and loving hearts to soothe me, and a new safe life before me from which the dread was swept away for ever. Mrs. Brabrook was there, and John, and Captain Bobby and Beta; and there were letters from Mrs. Sullivan and every one of the boys; and Mrs. Pimpernel was far, far away: and Jesse——

Ah, reader, that shriek of his rings in my ears as I write; the last sound he ever uttered. Never, never need I fear him any more; though he comes to me still sometimes in dreams, never again need I fear the sound of his voice or shrink from the look upon his face; for Jesse was dead, killed by the mysterious man who for so long—as we found afterwards—had watched and followed him. In the evidence of this man's trial it all came out; why so desperately Jesse had sought to rob me, why so recklessly he had planned to get possession of my

fortune. In America he had joined a secret society, a society composed chiefly of Irish Americans, formed for the purpose of carrying out an organised system of assassination in Ireland; and leading a wild life—a life which I saw written in his face, though I could not at the time interpret what was set forth there—he had smothered himself in debts; debts which, having access to the funds of the society, he had at first partially, and finally, when complete ruin was imminent, to a large amount, defrayed from its coffers. It was the approaching inevitable discovery of this which had caused his sudden return—or rather flight—to England; and his knowledge that he would pay for his crime with his life was the key to his subsequent schemes. To the society he had been known under a false name, but to the chiefs of the society, knowing well from the conditions of membership that no change of name or place, that no disguise could save him from their vengeance, he had written, promising that if his life were spared, he would refund what he had stolen, with an additional three thousand pounds, making in all a total of ten thousand, within a given time. The time was up a month before my coming of age; Mrs. Pimpernel had almost no money at her disposal, her income being derived from trust funds, the capital of which she could not touch; I was no use as a wife until I came into my fortune; and hence the desperate efforts to discover the whereabouts and get possession of the jewels. As the reader knows, the efforts were not successful, and through the mediation of Bracewell, one of the society's agents, and the immediate payment of two thousand pounds which Mrs. Pimpernel by hook or by crook had somehow scraped together, a further period of grace

was granted. But all the time Jesse had been watched and followed; and when, at the end of September, the second period was up, and when, by my refusal to come to Glamarnie before October, a fortnight at least would have to elapse between the date set down for payment and the possibility of making that payment, he knew that if his whereabouts were discovered, death was inevitable. If before he were tracked he could make restitution, he felt that he might yet be safe; but he could not force me into the Scotch marriage he had planned until we had both been three weeks in Scotland; and during the time I was at Glamarnie, his presence in the house had been kept secret from everybody but his mother and Beta. Owing to Beta's escape and the necessity, in consequence, of pushing forward by a day the arrangements he had made for his flight with me, he had not been able to avoid a meeting with Bracewell; and Bracewell, who had first betrayed me to Mrs. Pimpernel, had finally, becoming doubtful as to the payment of Mrs. Pimpernel's promised reward, betrayed Jesse to the man told off to track and finally to destroy him. So, at the last, I understood it all; why he had so persecuted me; why, marriage being the speedier as well as the safer way of getting possession of my money, he had preferred marriage to murder; and why he was obliged to withhold his name, until actually started on the journey, from the two men he had hired to convey us to the seaport town, where we were to have taken ship—whither I know not. It was close to this town that Mrs. Brabrook also had been taken, and, being set down within a few miles of it, had thus regained her liberty, but had lost all trace of Mrs. Pimpernel and Manningby. There and then

they disappeared from her life and from mine; I have never seen or heard of either of them since. Bracewell I saw once many years after, sweeping a crossing in a crowded part of London. I hardly think he saw or knew me, but so great was the horror his face called up in me, that I jumped into the nearest hansom, and was driven straight home.

CHAPTER LIII.

CONCLUSION.

READER, I am John Brabrook's wife. We were married indeed on that awful night of my flight from Glamarnie; married by the signing of that contract in the moonlight, and the declaration that we were man and wife; married after all those months of separation within ten minutes of our meeting again.

I suppose that the law which makes such a marriage possible, would also have found a means of dissolving it, had we both or either of us wished it. But we did not wish it; John's heart, as I had always known, was on his mother's side, and having once called me wife, he could not go back to the lonely life he had laid down for himself. And I? Well, I am always glad that I escaped being confronted with a problem, that the question of whether a man in John's position ought or ought not to marry, was taken out of my hands. I can lay down no principles in the abstract; I can only say that if I had had to choose, I am sure I should have followed out his mother's wish, and that I should have done so, not from her point of view, not—for it's no use pretending—with any idea of showing my faith in the Almighty, but simply because I loved him. For I was young then, reader; I had not considered problems and principles and abstract questions of right and wrong, and my heart was stronger than my

philosophy. I know much more of the world now, and the sin in it, and the suffering and the sacrifice that is the payment for sin; and still—— Well, all I can say is just what I said before, that I am very glad that the question was taken out of my hands; and I am still more glad, I must confess, that it was taken out of the hands of John.

We went to Ireland after we were married, openly married in a London church, on the same day that Beta became Mrs. Robert Lockwood.

“Oh, Hester,” she said to me after the ceremony, “to think that I’m married at last! Aren’t you glad?”

“Not half so glad as I am to be married myself,” I answered laughing; and then, seeing the old look on her face, the look somewhat puzzled and just a little hurt, that I had so often brought there; and knowing very well what she had meant to say, and also what she wanted me to answer, I put my arms about her and kissed her, and: “Dear,” I said, “we have been through so much together and now we have both got all that our hearts desired. And half my happiness lies in the knowledge of yours, and half yours I know, lies in mine.”

She kissed and clung to me, and paid me a characteristic compliment.

“I’m sure,” she said, “that Bob will like you so much.”

The boys were waiting for us, came half way down the drive to meet us, in fact, with Ettie in a little tandem cart, drawn by two donkeys.

“And is it yerself, Ma’am,” they cried, “with a husband all complete?”

“Yes, it’s me and him,” I answered, “and we’re married quite properly at last.”

And then Horace in just his old way, came out with one of his old phrases: "Is that a fact?" he said.

It was some days later, in the evening, as we all sat round the peat fire in the billiard-room, that I told them the story of how we escaped from "the robbers"; and great was their interest and sympathy and excitement, and many the things that they would have done had they been there; and sweet it was to find myself in their midst again, safe and happy and cared for; and joyous were the pictures that I saw in the glowing peat that night.

Well, it's many years ago now; the boys are all married, and there are little "boys"—not all of one sex—who have most of them, some of their fathers' ways. And I—well, the peat fire did not deceive me that night at Shívdallagh—I am very happy, sheltered and content in the love of the man I love. Neither has anxiety shadowed me; my trust in John was well founded, the prophecy I made on that sad evening on the cliffs near Granbigh Hold, that time would add to his strength and weaken the thing he combated, has proved a true one; and, fortified by my trust in him and by the added confidence bestowed by each passing year, he has lost the morbid fear which made the very consciousness of his inheritance almost a temptation in itself. There is nothing more to be said: that night of my direst need, was also the night on which, for ever, the dread went out of my life, and since then nothing that the world would count interesting has befallen me: for a happy woman, like a prosperous country, has no history.

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